From Fallen Woman to Businesswoman: The Radical Voices of Elizabeth Gaskell and Margaret Oliphant

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Chester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Katie Baker

April 2018

Declaration

The material being presented for examination is my own work and has not been submitted for an award of this or any other HEI except in minor particulars which are explicitly noted in the body of the thesis. Where research pertaining to the thesis was undertaken collaboratively, the nature and extent of my individual contribution has been made explicit.

Signed

Date

Abstract

This thesis demonstrates the ways in which Elizabeth Gaskell and Margaret Oliphant drew upon their domestic identities as wives and mothers to write in radical, yet subtle, ways which had the potential to educate and inform their young female readership. While in the nineteenth century the domestic space was viewed as the rightful place for women, I show how both Gaskell and Oliphant expanded this idea to demonstrate within their novels and short stories the importance of what I term an 'extended domesticity'. This thesis charts how Gaskell and Oliphant educated their young female readers to imagine their lives beyond conventional domesticity. The extended version of domesticity they presented offered space for women of all backgrounds and experiences, including those whose lives did not fit into the Victorian ideal of marriage and maternity, to forge their own identities, educate themselves, and find personal fulfillment. Through examples of female characters from several of Gaskell's and Oliphant's novels and short stories, I explore the ways in which both writers made clear the importance of the domestic space as a tool for women's personal growth. Without providing prescriptive answers or solutions, both authors encouraged their readers to make decisions about their own lives by showing them what was possible when domesticity was extended into a place for education and development. They also pointed to possibilities for women beyond the domestic sphere.

In the 'Introduction' to the thesis I outline my argument for Gaskell's and Oliphant's 'radical voices', discussing the range of recent critical approaches, as well as positioning Gaskell and Oliphant in their historical context as nineteenth-century women writers. I explore how the rise of feminism affected their work and consider how their way of communicating ideas in fiction differed from the approach taken by their contemporary, George Eliot.

Chapter One discusses in detail Gaskell's and Oliphant's domestic identities and how both authors drew upon these to create an extended domesticity within their novels and short stories. I explore the publishing careers of both women before exploring how they exemplified the importance of educating their young female writers with their work. This chapter also introduces Gaskell's focus on representing female sexuality and Oliphant's interest in exploring the choices available for women in marriage and a career. Central to the chapter is a discussion of how both authors extended the boundaries of the domestic by representing it as a place for women to find recuperation, education, and personal growth. They did this, I argue, via their development of 'radical voices'.

In Chapter Two the focus is on Gaskell's representation of the 'fallen' or sexually experienced unmarried woman. Through the close analysis of four of Gaskell's novels – *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, *North and South* and *Wives and Daughters* - and two of her short stories – 'Lizzie Leigh' and *Cousin Phillis*, I demonstrate the evolution of her female characters, all of whom experience their sexuality in different ways. While her earlier young women have little autonomy over their lives, her later female characters are endowed with the ability to make their own decisions and forge their own identities. Gaskell makes clear that sexuality is a natural part of women's lives and that even so-called 'fallen' women should have a place in an extended domestic community or family where they will find room for recuperation and rehabilitation.

Chapter Three moves on to discuss Oliphant's representation of 'enterprising' women. These women make choices regarding marriage and maternity, and even have

identities in the public sphere as businesswomen. Again, through the close analysis of four of Oliphant's novels – *Miss Marjoribanks*, *Phoebe Junior*, *Hester* and *Kirsteen* - and two of her short stories – 'A Girl of the Period' and 'Mademoiselle', I demonstrate how Oliphant represented a range of female characters who were enterprising in different ways; from those who did not have careers of their own, yet used their talents in their communities, to those who managed their own businesses and enjoyed identities in the public sphere.

The 'Conclusion' sums up the main arguments of the thesis, concluding that for both Gaskell and Oliphant their professional identities were as important as their domestic identities and that their novels and short stories suggest that all women could achieve an assimilation of private and public roles. I suggest that by using their radical, yet subtle voices, Gaskell and Oliphant showed that women could make choices and decisions over their own lives which moved them beyond the realms of conventional domesticity.

Contents

From Fallen Woman to Businesswoman: The Radical Voices of Elizabeth Gaskell and Margaret Oliphant

Introduction

Elizabeth Gaskell and Margaret Oliphant: Developing Radical Voices

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) and Margaret Oliphant (1828-1897) embodied an important space in nineteenth-century literature. Both women were wives, mothers, and successful writers and both managed to use their skills as authors to negotiate and even influence, changing attitudes to women in the nineteenth century. This thesis will explore how, as the title suggests, Gaskell and Oliphant used their familial, domestic experiences to write in 'radical' ways which could educate and inform their young female readership. I will demonstrate how, through their novels and short stories, Gaskell and Oliphant showed the evolution from women who had little autonomy over their lives, to women who could make their own decisions and choices and could even enjoy a career of their own. It is important here for me to explain what I mean by 'radical' in reference to both writers. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'radical', in the contemporary sense, as: 'characterized by independence of or a departure from what is usual or traditional; progressive, unorthodox, or innovative in outlook, conception, design.'[1] I will argue in this thesis that Gaskell's and Oliphant's writing demonstrates that both women were keen to make a departure from 'traditional' nineteenth-century views of female experience. Their voices were radical not only because they did not shy away from discussing topics such as female sexuality

[1] Definition of 'radical', *Oxford English Dictionary*, http://www.oed.com.voyager.chester.ac.uk/view/Entry/157251?rskey=wpRHnC&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid [accessed 31/8/2017].

and choices for women regarding marriage, children, and a career, but also because of the subtle ways they managed to have that discussion while remaining within the boundaries of Victorian notions of propriety. Throughout the thesis I will provide examples from both writers which demonstrate their progressive attitudes, while also recognising the subtlety of their expression of the need for changing attitudes to women. I will argue that while both writers shared a forward-thinking, modern approach to women and their experiences, they also shared the need to remain within the constraints of nineteenth-century ideas of 'respectability' in order to maintain their income as professional authors and the status quo of their personal lives.

Both Gaskell and Oliphant, I will show, occupied a crucial space in Victorian literary culture, which gave both writers the opportunity to shape and influence changing attitudes to women in the nineteenth century. Both writers presented a unique form of feminism within their writing which did not overtly attempt to break through social constructs, but which influenced their young female readers to consider broadening their outlook on life and contemplate a wider range of options nonetheless. As a result of their belief in the importance of the domestic space, I will argue that Gaskell and Oliphant challenged ideas of 'correct' roles for women within domesticity. While Victorian society condemned women to the domestic sphere, Gaskell and Oliphant complicated the notion by emphasising the importance of the domestic in relation to well-being, self-awareness, and personal growth. Through their female characters, they used their radicalism to represent the domestic space as the rightful domain of all women, regardless of their experience. This meant that as well as the conventional wife and mother, Gaskell and Oliphant showed that the domestic space could offer opportunities for the personal growth and development of all women, including those whose lives did not fit into the Victorian ideal of marriage and

maternity, whether spinsters or fallen women or those who were conventionally seen as having forfeited a home.

Central to my argument is the idea that within their novels and short stories both Gaskell and Oliphant demonstrated the possibilities for expanding the domestic space beyond its conventional boundaries so that it became a place belonging to all women, regardless of their experience. I will show that both Gaskell and Oliphant demonstrate that women could be apparently unconventional while also simultaneously entirely conventional. I will look to examples from Gaskell's and Oliphant's own lives which demonstrate that women could have domestic, family lives (as they did) while also enjoying professional lives, and even careers, if they chose. Throughout the thesis, I refer to the expansion of the domestic space as 'extended domesticity', a term which considers an expanded version of the domestic which offers room for women to educate themselves and to find personal fulfilment and growth. Though the domesticity of the home was conventionally seen as the rightful place of nineteenth-century women, Gaskell and Oliphant demonstrate that it could be a space used to advantage women. For Gaskell, this extension of the domestic could offer rehabilitation, reflection and recuperation to sexually experienced unmarried women, so-called 'fallen' women, and I want to emphasise how Gaskell envisages this rehabilitation through the importance of extended domesticity.[2] I will demonstrate how Gaskell worked hard in her novels and short stories to show that sexuality was something which was natural to all women regardless of their marital status and should not result in societal condemnation. For Oliphant, extended domesticity represented a platform from which women could develop a life which could include a career and

[2] My use of the term 'female sexuality' in reference to Gaskell is anachronistic. Though she does not use the term, she discusses the concept to encompass sex, sexual emotions, feelings and desires.

even the forging of a 'public' and enterprising identity. I will demonstrate how within their novels and short stories, both writers asserted radical ideas in representing the possibilities within this extended domesticity for women to forge spaces which, while not within the public sphere, were not wholly within the domestic, either. Important to both Gaskell's and Oliphant's consideration of extended domesticity is the representation within their novels and short stories of unconventional (or as Patsy Stoneman suggests, 'unorthodox') and sometimes non-biological families who do not fit into the ideal mould of father, mother, and children.[3] I will argue that both authors incorporated the unconventional family structure into their writing to show that the domestic space could be extended to include those families who did not fit neatly into the conventional pattern. By including such examples in their writing, both authors could demonstrate that a conventional family structure was not the only possibility open to women. In literal terms, extended domesticity allowed women to move beyond the expected realms of the domestic space in the nineteenth-century. It could be physically represented through a room within the home where, for example, writers such as Gaskell and Oliphant could sit down and write, or where women could begin to hone a skill and consider a career. In psychological terms, extended domesticity allowed women to realise that the home did not have to be a confined space but could be a starting point from which they could expand their own identities. As the thesis continues, I will explore extended domesticity in more detail, providing examples from Gaskell's and Oliphant's own lives, and from their novels.

Another central pillar of my argument is that for both Gaskell and Oliphant, educating their young female readers through their novels and short stories was of

[3] Patsy Stoneman, 'Gaskell, gender, and the family' in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 131-147, p. 143.

great importance. Through the incorporation of themes such as female sexuality, marriage and opportunity they were able to demonstrate the unacceptable injustices that occurred towards women. Their subtle exploration of the differing versions of sexuality and female choice in marriage, maternity and a career enabled them to make young women aware of their situations and also to make decisions about them. As a Unitarian, Gaskell believed 'that girls, as well as boys, should be educated and should be encouraged to make their own moral judgments.'[4] Certainly, Gaskell's faith was an important and guiding force in her life and Unitarian teachings regarding the essential nature of education (particularly female education) reinforces the importance she places in making her novels morally educative tools. Education was important to both authors because it demonstrated that life experiences, such as sexuality, were a part of daily, ordinary life and belonged to all women. As both authors and wives and mothers, Gaskell and Oliphant demonstrated the importance of life experience, including experience which was otherwise considered domestic and 'ordinary'. For both women, domesticity could be a crucial tool in female development. Oliphant's feelings towards her own life and the importance she places on experience are present in a section of her *Autobiography* where she compares her writing with that of Charlotte Brontë. Though Oliphant admits that she feels her work to be 'perfectly pale and colourless beside [Brontë's]', she stresses the importance of her own 'life experience [and] fuller conception of life' which she believes is vitally important, not only in daily living, but also in writing.[5] It is Oliphant's belief in the importance of experience, and what it provides to her writing, which makes her novels so useful as

[4] Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 27.
[5] Margaret Oliphant, *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, ed. Elisabeth Jay (Ormskirk: Broadview Press, 2002), p. 43.

educative tools for her readers. While she is reticent about her writing's value when compared with writers such as Brontë, her comments suggest an underlying belief in what her experience can offer her readers. Throughout the thesis, I will engage with nineteenth century literary critic Josie Billington's book, *Is Literature Healthy?*, which explores the usefulness of literature's role in the context of illnesses such as depression, trauma, and emotional pain.[6] One of the central premises of the book is its concern with literature's powerful ability to put into words the humanity and sense of feeling in all of us, even when we struggle to find the right language to make clear our thoughts and feelings.[7] I will show how Gaskell's and Oliphant's novels and short stories offer their readers room for crucial thought and feeling which Billington's book suggests is so vitally important. It is from within this thinking space that both women allow their readers to form an understanding of, and an empathy with, the diverse range of characters they are reading about and engaging with. Without prescribing answers or solutions, Gaskell and Oliphant leave their readers room to consider, decide, and understand the situations they encounter in their novels. I will argue that in their fiction both women initiate an education process which is triggered by the readers' own thoughts and feelings, and which is perhaps more powerful and effective than conventional education as a result. In a letter to her daughter, Marianne, Gaskell reinforces this, suggesting that she does not feel 'any influence acts *permanently* well but what is *unconsciously* exercised by its possessor'.[8] In other words, for Gaskell, the most beneficial and effective form of education is that which is subtle, implicit and based on her readers' own thoughts and feelings rather than one which prescribes direct

[6] Josie Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[7] Ibid.
[8] Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Letters of Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. J.A.V Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), Letter 97 to Marianne Gaskell, May 1851, pp. 835-838. Emphasis in the original.

solutions and judgements. Both authors demonstrate that the space offered to women through extended domesticity is intrinsically connected with the opportunity for personal growth, rehabilitation, fulfilment, and education. As a result, their novels and short stories reinforce the importance for women to use the extended domesticity of the home for valuable personal development.

The idea of personal space is taken up by literary critic Elaine Showalter in her seminal book, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Writers from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing.* Though originally published in 1977, many of Showalter's ideas remain relevant today and because of this, the book was reissued with a reconsidered 'Introduction' in 2013. Focussing on the development of women's writing as a genre from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the twentieth century, Showalter's book considers the role women writers played in documenting and exploring social change throughout the era. In her 'Introduction' to the recently republished edition, Showalter explores the idea of women having their own space within their homes:

> If the room of one's own becomes the destination […], a feminine secession from the political world, from 'male' power, logic, and violence, it is a tomb, like Clarissa Dalloway's attic bedroom. But if contact with a female tradition and a female culture is centre, if women take strength in their independence to act in the world, women's literature could take any form and deal with any subject.'[9]

Gaskell's and Oliphant's representation of personal space within the extended domesticity of the home was crucial in suggesting to women readers that there were opportunities for their own development within the domestic sphere; that education and self-development could occur within the home. Far from being the 'destination', or in other words, the final aim for women, this extended domesticity was the starting

[9] Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Writers from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (London: Virago Press, 2009), p. xiii.

point from which women could educate themselves, find personal fulfilment, and forge their own identities. Much like Virginia Woolf's construct of a 'room of one's own', (which Showalter alludes to) this space enabled women to thrive and develop.[10] It offered room not only for the traditional tasks of caring for husband and children (although it could also include this), but also, crucially, for looking after oneself by providing opportunities for education, reflection, recuperation, and personal growth. Both Gaskell and Oliphant reinforced the importance of the domestic space as a place for intellectual as well as emotional fulfilment by using spaces within their own homes to write. Showalter appears to question female writers' motives for using their private domestic spaces to carry out their writing, stating 'this generation of novelists would not have wanted an office or even "'a room of one's own'", it was essential that the writing be carried out in the home.'[11] She suggests that these writers 'worked hard to present their writing as an extension of their feminine role, an activity that did not detract from their womanhood but in some sense augmented it.'[12] Gaskell and Oliphant demonstrated through their own lives the possibilities open to women to enjoy their 'womanhood' while simultaneously enjoying a career and even a 'public' existence. Both writers showed that the home offered 'room' for intellectual fulfilment, and that as a location, the domestic space should be viewed as important and useful and not somehow separate from personal growth and fulfilment. Indeed, for practical reasons (namely, for the purpose of taking care of their families) both writers utilised the domestic space for the benefit of their own professional careers by writing in rooms within their homes. Such practical experiences made both Gaskell

[10] For Woolf's essay, see: Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
[11] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 70.
[12] Ibid.

and Oliphant aware of how much women could achieve at home and of the possibilities offered by extended domesticity.

Critical Debates: Radical or Not?

Throughout this thesis, I engage with critics whose debates have directly engaged with the novels and short stories of Gaskell and Oliphant. While some of these critics share my idea that both women adopted radical approaches in their writing, there are others who do not. Though I engage in detail with these critical debates later in my discussion, I feel it is useful here to provide a brief outline of several of their critical ideas, beginning with those based on Gaskell. Of those critics who do represent Gaskell and Oliphant as unconventional, and even radical, I will explain, briefly, how my argument differs from theirs.[13]

Nineteenth century feminist critic Susan Hamilton discusses what she argues is Gaskell's nineteenth-century reputation as a domestic woman whose writing could not match that produced by her contemporaries, such as George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë.[14] While she views Gaskell's domesticity as useful, she concludes that her lingering reputation has affected the way she is considered, even today. Gaskell critics Dorice Williams Elliott, Anne Longmuir, and Patsy Stoneman all look to Gaskell's forward-thinking representation of the role of women in her novels.[15] Williams Elliott points to Gaskell's examples of the woman visitor and the social space from which

[13] I engage in much more detail with these critical debates throughout the thesis. These brief descriptions are intended to place my argument in the wider discussion and explain how my ideas differ from, or extend, those provided.

[14] For the complete discussion, see: Susan Hamilton, *Frances Power Cobbe and Victorian Feminism* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[15] See: Dorice Williams Elliott, 'The Female Visitor and the Marriage of Classes in Gaskell's *North and South' Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 49.1 (1994), pp. 21-49; Anne Longmuir 'Consuming Subjects: Women and the Market in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South', Nineteenth Century Contexts*, Vol. 34, (2012), pp. 237-252; Stoneman, 'Gaskell, gender, and the family'.

she enacts her role. Longmuir explores the woman shopper in Gaskell's novels and the part the 'shopper' plays as a marketplace consumer. Stoneman looks to Gaskell's blurring of her roles as an author and as a mother, as well as considering her exploration of unorthodox families. Though all three critical debates are useful in the ways they view Gaskell as an unconventional writer, none of them explores her representation of what I term extended domesticity, or the value she places on using the domestic for forging an identity in and beyond the home.

Much has been written about Gaskell's engagement with female sexuality, particularly her representation of the 'fallen', or sexually experienced woman. The debates of nineteenth century critics Meghan Burke Hattaway and Deborah Logan each explore what they see as Gaskell's difficulty in defining a truly 'respectable woman'.[16] Logan sets out her idea of the 'sexual spectrum' which positions the fallen woman at one extreme, and the married mother at the other. The nineteenth century literary critic Deirdre d'Albertis focusses on Gaskell's treatment of the prostitute in her novels and short stories, suggesting that Gaskell does not appear to see a potential for prostitutes to return to domestic life.[17] Gaskell scholars Terence Wright's and Hilary Schor's discussions explore Gaskell's representations of female characters who are prostitutes or victims of seduction, such as Ruth Hilton.[18] While Wright argues for what he sees as the clash between morality and nature, Schor points to what she considers to be the sexual naivety and confusion of girls like Ruth. Though all of these

[16] See: Meghan Burke Hattaway, '"Such A Strong Wish For Wings": *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* and Elizabeth Gaskell's Fallen Angels', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 42.4 (2014), pp. 671-690; Deborah Anna Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing: Marry, Stitch, Die or Do Worse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998).

[17] See: Deirdre d'Albertis, *Dissembling Fictions: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Social Text* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997).

[18] See: Terence Wright, *Elizabeth Gaskell: 'We are not angels': Realism, Gender, Values* (Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1995); Hilary M. Schor, *Scheherazade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell & the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

arguments are useful in my exploration of female sexuality in Gaskell's novels and short stories, I feel none of them demonstrate what I argue, namely that Gaskell's representation of sexuality suggests it as a natural part of women's lives, which entitled all women to have a place within the recuperative and rehabilitative space of extended domesticity, regardless of the nature of their sexual experiences.

I would now like to move on to those critics whose debates discuss the novels and short stories of Oliphant. In two extremely useful essays, critic George Levine argues for Oliphant's place as an important and underrated nineteenth-century novelist.[19] He looks to Oliphant's dedication to representing ordinary experience throughout her novels and short stories, suggesting that her strength lies in her ability to register every day domestic experience and all of its difficulties. While I engage throughout the thesis with Levine's arguments, which help me explore the intricacies of Oliphant's radical voice, I further his debate by looking at how Oliphant not only remains dedicated to the domestic space, but how her novels extend that space, suggesting that ordinary domesticity can be a useful tool for helping women to forge their own identities and careers out in the public sphere. Nineteenth and early-twentieth century critic Katherine Mullin, too, explores Oliphant's role as an unconventional writer who, she suggests, does not deserve the unfairly-assigned anti-feminist label which has persisted.[20] Mullin focusses especially on the working women in Oliphant's novels and short stories to reinforce her sometimes unconventional representations of femininity. Though Mullin's argument is extremely useful in helping me to explore the idea of female enterprise in Oliphant's work, she stops short

[19] See: George Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously: *A Country Gentleman and his Family'*, *ELH,* Vol. 83.1, (2016), pp. 253-258; George Levine, 'Reading Margaret Oliphant', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. 19.2, (2014), pp. 232-246.
[20] See: Katherine Mullin, *Working Girls: Fiction, Sexuality, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

of focussing on women in domestic spaces, like Lucilla Marjoribanks and Phoebe Beecham, who use female enterprise which emerges from extended domesticity, in different ways to those women who have actual working roles in the public sphere of paid work. Another critic who challenges Oliphant's reputation as an anti-feminist is nineteenth century literature and culture scholar Patricia Zakreski, who explores the sartorial choices of female characters such as Phoebe Beecham, suggesting that Oliphant used dress in her novels and short stories to denote difference and unconventionality.[21] While I engage with Zakreski's ideas, I further them by exploring how clothing choices, such as Phoebe's, demonstrate their difference which begins with clothing, but moves into a shift into extended domesticity and away from convention. Nineteenth century literary critic Tamara S. Wagner, too, discusses the ways in which Oliphant represents her female characters' (such as Phoebe's) knowledge of business matters outside of the domestic space.[22] Though Wagner's debate explores Oliphant's desire to represent female intelligence, I also consider how this enables her to demonstrate the irrational taboo which exists around the possibilities for women's roles in the public space. Indeed, Oliphant evidences women's abilities in business roles through female characters such as Catherine Vernon and Kirsteen Douglas, both of whom are in the domestic and the public spaces simultaneously. Critic and historian Margarete Rubik, too, explores Oliphant's 'subversive potential' as a female writer whose intelligent and confident female characters did not always fit into the Victorian ideal of 'the submissive angel in the house.'[23] Though Rubik looks to Oliphant's representation of work as an important

[21] See: Patricia Zakreski, 'Fashioning the Domestic Novel: Rewriting Narrative Patterns in Margaret Oliphant's *Phoebe Junior* and *Dress, Journal of Victorian Culture,* Vol. 21, (2016), pp. 56-73.
[22] See: Tamara S Wagner, "'Honour! That's for men": Satirizing Gender and Genre Confines in Margaret Oliphant's *Phoebe Junior', Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies,* Vol. 7.3, (2011), pp. 23-38.
[23] See: Margarete Rubik, *The Novels of Mrs Oliphant: A Subversive View of Traditional Themes* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 113.

element of women's lives, she considers domesticity as a return to convention, rather than, as I argue, an important and progressive space for women to find personal growth, education and fulfilment.

The Rise of the Woman Writer

Victorian women writers like Gaskell and Oliphant were at the forefront of a new and developing culture focussed on female experience, using their novels, short stories, and articles to make their voices heard in a male-dominated society. Though Gaskell's and Oliphant's writing has not always been considered in the same 'first-league' as the work of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, it has a crucially important significance nonetheless, particularly in relation to the changing roles and place of women in the nineteenth century. I feel it is important at this point to look at why women writers and their novels were so culturally important and influential, especially for their young women readers. The education of their female readers through their novels and short stories was a key motivation to Gaskell and Oliphant. Both women wanted to use their writing to make young women aware of their own and of others' situations, to understand the societal injustices that existed in relation to women, and to help them make decisions about their own lives. They wanted to encourage young women to find personal fulfilment and to forge their own identities, and they did this by means of a broad range of different female characters, whose situations varied considerably.

If young women were to become informed and educated from the books that they read in the way Gaskell and Oliphant intended, then access to their (and other women writers') books was crucial. Public libraries and circulating libraries such as Mudie's were extremely popular with nineteenth-century readers, and because buying

books was extremely expensive, the libraries' shelves were stocked with the latest publications. For a small rental fee, readers could borrow books from the circulating library, cutting considerably the cost of having to purchase the latest titles. Not only did these libraries attract (largely middle-class) female readers, they also relied largely on the novels of women writers to fill their shelves.[24] As a form of literature, the novel was considered to be the primary territory of the 'woman reader'. In her important book, *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914*, Kate Flint explores how the figure of the 'woman reader' was of great interest and concern to the Victorian establishment. She notes how, as the numbers of women readers increased, so too did the anxiety of their 'male counterparts' who were worried, particularly, about 'the phenomenon of the growth of the circulating library.'[25] While establishments such as Mudie's Circulating Library 'prided [itself] on the wholesome moral tone of the volumes on [its] shelves', the popularity of the library as a means of entertainment meant that young women had access to a wide variety of reading material.[26] This raised fears that 'young women [would be] corrupted by what they read […], becoming preoccupied with the importance of romance.'[27] Concerns extended also to the idea that 'reading fiction […] wastes time which may more valuably be employed elsewhere.'[28] Undoubtedly, the novel's availability in the library, meant that young nineteenth-century women could enjoy reading new books written by women writers like Gaskell and Oliphant who used their writing as an outlet for a wide-range of topics and subjects, including marriage, relationships, gender and sexuality. As Elisabeth Jay notes, and as I refer to in more detail later in the thesis, Oliphant (and this could refer equally to Gaskell)

[24] Information about the circulating library can be found in Eric Glasgow, 'Circulating libraries', *Library Review*, 51 (2002), pp. 420-423.
[25] Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 26.
[26] Ibid., p. 144.
[27] Ibid., p. 24.
[28] Ibid.

appreciated the importance of reading as a means of young girls gaining 'knowledge of human behaviour' and that because of this, it was an author's 'responsibility' to help guide their readers.[29] Libraries, according to Oliphant, offered the ideal opportunity not only for 'access to knowledge', but also for space and refuge for 'reflection' and consideration.'[30] If critics of the novel form were concerned that the availability of new books would open young readers' eyes to the changing world around them and their place within it, they were right. In an article written for the *Westminster Review*, G.H. Lewes acknowledged the usefulness of novel's such as *Ruth* for young female readers who may find themselves in a similar position to the protagonist, Ruth Hilton.[31] If critics such as Lewes could begin to appreciate the useful possibilities of novels which explored real-life situations, like Ruth's seduction, abandonment, and pregnancy, then not only were Gaskell's novels educating her readers, they were also having an impact on how sexually-experienced women were considered and labelled.

Earlier in the century, in a move to silence the novel form's detractors, Jane Austen dedicates the end of Chapter Five of Volume One of *Northanger Abbey* to a defence of novelists and novels from the 'pride [and] ignorance [of] our foes'.[32] Through a speech given by the character, Henry Tilney, Austen criticises those who suggest the main purpose of the novel is to provide readers with frivolity and nonsense, insisting instead that a novel is 'some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature […], the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.'[33] Austen's position on the importance of novels and what they could offer

[29] Elisabeth Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: A Fiction to Herself* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 114.
[30] Jay, 'A Bed of Her Own: Margaret Oliphant', p. 56.
[31] Ibid., p. 124.
[32] Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), p. 22.
[33] Ibid. p. 23.

their readers about 'the […] powers of the mind' and 'knowledge of human nature' made it clear that novel readers could take more than entertainment from their reading material. While undeniably novels were written for leisure and entertainment purposes, they could also teach their readers about their lives and the changing world around them. Austen's success as a novel-writer, coupled with the defence of her art-form, had started the important and necessary shift which encouraged future women writers such as Gaskell and Oliphant to approach bold topics such as gender and female sexuality in their novels. Indeed, novels became the perfect platform for women writers such as Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, Eliot, and Oliphant to make their voices and opinions heard. The shifting cultural tides of the nineteenth century, particularly around the subject of the role of women, meant that women writers could discuss issues within their work which would directly affect their female readers by encouraging them to think of the lives of different women. This was particularly pertinent for Gaskell and Oliphant whose writing broached topics including prostitution, female sexuality, choices for women in terms of whether or not they got married and had children, and even women's entry into the public space and a professional career.

By the mid nineteenth century, feminist organisations such as the Langham Place Group and active feminists like Barbara Bodichon and Frances Power Cobbe were gaining in prominence and popularity.[34] Demands about women's roles in society, and access to education and political rights were becoming increasingly difficult to ignore as the fight for a female public voice increased in momentum. As these debates raged, many women novelists, Gaskell and Oliphant included, began to

[34] For more information on Barbara Bodichon and the Langham Place Group, see: Pauline Nestor, 'Negotiating a Self: Barbara Bodichon in America and Algiers' *Postcolonial Studies,* Vol. 8.2, (2003), pp. 155-64.

use their writing as the perfect platform to add their voices to the ever-growing dispute on the 'Woman Question'. As the name given to the range of debates which centred on the changing nature of women's roles in society, the 'Woman Question' was focused on topics including female education, the rights of women, sexuality and marriage; in other words, many of the topics considered and discussed by Gaskell and Oliphant in their novels and short stories.[35] As Showalter explains, women writers' novels reflected the world around them, with the focus increasingly shifting to 'social novels […] [and] problem novels [which enabled] women writers to [..] push back the boundaries of their sphere and present their profession as one that required not only freedom of language and thought, but also mobility and activity in the world.'[36] In the Preface to *Mary Barton*, Gaskell makes clear her intention to use her writing as a tool to 'give some utterance to the agony which from time to time convulses [poorer work-people in society]; the agony of suffering without the sympathy of the happy.'[37] Unhappy with what she acknoweldged as the unfairness meted out to those people in society whose daily lives were filled with hardship and struggle, *Mary Barton*'s Preface outlines Gaskell's drive to use her novels to educate her readers about the unfairness and equality that existed. The idea of freedom of expression, coupled with women taking an active role in society, was crucial to women novelists like Gaskell and Oliphant, both of whom asserted their marital status by writing under the names 'Mrs Gaskell' and 'Mrs Oliphant'. By the nature of their profession, they used their pen to make their voices heard, leading by example to demonstrate that married women and mothers could also have public identities and even careers. The important

[35] For more information on 'The Woman Question', see Nicola Diane Thompson, *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
[36] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 23.
[37] Elizabeth Gaskell, Preface to *Mary Barton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 3. All further references will be made in the body of the text.

exploration of women's place in the domestic space of the home (long considered the 'correct' space for women) and in the public space, was a theme explored in detail in novels such as Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) and *Wives and Daughters* (1866), and Oliphant's *Hester* (1883) and *Kirsteen* (1890). Both authors provided representations within their novels of female characters who blurred the boundaries between the domestic and the public spaces, questioning the idea of a single defined role for women. Gaskell and Oliphant suggested that women could have an identity which moved beyond the traditional boundaries of the domestic space, into an extended version of the domestic and even beyond it into the public space. Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871), too, explored ideas around women's education and achievements, and the difficulties women faced when confined in unsuitable, stifling marriages. Like never before, women writers were using their novels to confront issues which not only reflected matters within women's daily lives, but which showed their readers real-life situations they may recognise in their own lives.

Undoubtedly, as women writers, Gaskell and Oliphant offered their young female readers something more than entertainment from their novels: they offered education and insights into the varieties of female experience. They demonstrated to their readers the possibilities within the domestic space for forging an identity and for gaining self-fulfilment. In Oliphant's novels, Miss Marjoribanks and Phoebe Junior, for example (and I expand upon this in Chapter Three) Oliphant highlights how books can be used as an educative tool. Both Phoebe and Lucilla are educated novel readers who use what they have learnt from their reading to forge and reinforce identities within extended domesticity. Both women use their reading to their own advantage, expanding their understanding. While this level of influence brought with it concerns that young women would become 'passive consumers' who did not carefully consider

what type of material they read, but would instead be 'automatically influenced' by it, some reviewers saw the value in what novels offered.[38] As Flint notes, '[some] reviewers acknowledged that women may read in an active search for examples and role models.'[39] This, she continues, was evidenced in 1868, when a reviewer in the *Eclectic and Congregational Review*, suggested that 'Women instinctively resort to fiction as a source of consolation and help.'[40] For both Gaskell and Oliphant, the ability to provide their readers with insights not only into their own lives, but into the lives of other women, was of the utmost importance. By offering within their novels and short stories examples of women from across the social scale, with different life experiences, they hoped to encourage women to reflect upon, make choices about, their own lives. Undoubtedly, nineteenth-century women writers played an integral role, not only in how society viewed women and their changing roles, but also in how women viewed themselves and their own situations. By offering a wide range of life situations within their novels, Gaskell and Oliphant demonstrated the importance of female writers passing on experience and wisdom to their younger generation of readers. As professional women with careers within the public space, both Gaskell and Oliphant actively showed young women that it was possible for them to simultaneously enjoy domestic and public identities if they chose. They also provided examples of advantageous reciprocal relationships between older and younger women within their novels. Later in the thesis, I explore in more detail several of these relationships, (particularly that between Catherine and Hester in Oliphant's *Hester*, and Miss Jean and Kirsteen in *Kirsteen*), where older, more experienced women pass on their skills to their younger counterparts. Gaskell, too, explored the importance of

[38] Flint, *The Woman Reader*, p. 147.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Author Unknown,'Lady Novelists', *Eclectic and Congregational Review*, 15 (1868), pp. 301-302. Quoted in Flint, *The Woman Reader*, pp. 147-148.

such relationships. In *Mary Barton*, for example, Mary is assisted and guided by her aunt, Esther, who, though castigated as a prostitute, helps Mary to avoid the same fate.

Gaskell, Oliphant, and Eliot

In this next section, I would like to look at how Gaskell's and Oliphant's role as nineteenth-century women writers differed from that of their contemporary, George Eliot. It is undeniable that, as the century progressed, 'Eliot increasingly came to dominate [her] period, and to represent the models against which other female novelists were measured. […] For twenty years, […] Oliphant had to negotiate subjects in terms of what Eliot was writing.'[41] Indeed, it is undeniable that for many Victorian reviewers and later critics Gaskell's and Oliphant's novels were not considered to be in quite the same league as the work of writers like Eliot and Charlotte Brontë. However, I argue that their writing was of great, and even equal, value, offering an insight, and an inroad, into women's lives in ways very different to their contemporary, Eliot. As realist writers, Gaskell, Oliphant and Eliot attempted to uncover the human condition and reveal through their writing life situations and experiences.[42] Yet, where Eliot feels the need to amend and to make sense of a situation, attempting to offer to her readers answers and resolutions, Gaskell and Oliphant instead demonstrate what happens when the flow of life continues. They do not prescribe solutions to their readers; instead, they allow their readers to come to their own conclusions and make their own decisions.

[41] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 87.
[42] For more on Realism, see: Lilian Furst, *Realism* (Longman, 1992); J.P. Stern, *On Realism* (Routldge, 1973); Derek Walder, *The Realist Novel* (Routledge, 1996).

As a result, one of the main differences was in the types of experience registered in the novels of Gaskell and Oliphant in contrast to Eliot's focus. For Gaskell and Oliphant, representing the situation of the individual was central to their writing, while for Eliot, 'her determination to subordinate the claims of an individual to wider social demands' usually took precedence.[43] In other words, in a bid to educate and inform their young female readers, Gaskell and Oliphant used their novels and short stories to offer an intimate look into the lives of their female characters and their life situations. Though the 'wider social demands' which so concerned Eliot also existed within the background of their narratives, such as the issues surrounding female sexuality, and choices for women in marriage and even a career, the representation of the individual, her choices, and her treatment by a judgmental society, were always of greater concern to Gaskell and Oliphant than the representation of the issue at large.[44] For both women, the importance of the individual story was crucial in inspiring their readers to think about their own lives. By offering examples of differing versions of female sexuality, along with women's roles in extended domesticity, they were encouraging their young female readers not only to consider their own lives but also to make informed decisions about them.

Despite their different ways of writing, Gaskell and Oliphant read and admired Eliot's work. In several of her private letters, Gaskell mentions Eliot's novels and short stories, even writing to Eliot herself to offer her congratulations and admiration on the success of 'Amos Barton', 'Janet's Repentance', and *Adam Bede*. In a letter to George Smith, Gaskell writes: 'Do you know I can't help liking her [Eliot], - *because* she wrote those books. Yes I do! I have tried to be moral, & dislike […] her books – but

[43] Kate Flint, 'George Eliot and gender' in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 159-180, p. 163.
[44] Ibid.

it won't do. There is not a […] wrong thought in them'.[45] Gaskell's comments were in response to the revelation that 'George Eliot' was actually the notorious Marian Evans, who lived with a man without being married to him. Oliphant, too, shared her thoughts on her contemporary. In her *Autobiography*, she famously compared her own literary output to Eliot's, writing, '[…] George Eliot's life has […] stirred me up to an involuntary confession. […] Should I have done better if I had been kept, like her, in a mental greenhouse and taken care of?'[46] Despite both Gaskell's and Oliphant's references to Eliot's somewhat unconventional lifestyle, in which she lived, unmarried, with George Henry Lewes, both women's words show their appreciation and even admiration for their contemporary's writing career. I would suggest that Gaskell's refusal to 'be moral' and dislike Eliot, and Oliphant's somewhat envious longing for the 'mental greenhouse' afforded by Eliot's lack of domestic responsibility, demonstrates their appreciation for a professional woman whose life did not fit into the typical mould of marriage and maternity. Yet, I would also argue that it is precisely the difference between the domestic constructs of Gaskell's and Oliphant's lives compared with Eliot's, that made their novels so different.

As married women with husbands and families to take care of, Gaskell's and Oliphant's domestic responsibilities were as important to them as their writing careers. Though both women were professional authors with public identities and busy publishing schedules, the day-to-day running of their homes was as crucial to them as keeping up to date with writing deadlines. Indeed, as Elisabeth Jay notes, when Oliphant read J.W. Cross's *Life of George Eliot*, she was 'shocked by the way in which

[45] Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Letters of Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. J.A.V Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), Letter 451 to George Smith, November 30th, 1859, pp. 593-594. Emphasis in the original.

[46] Margaret Oliphant, *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant* ed. Elisabeth Jay (Ormskirk: Broadview Press, 2002), pp. 49-50.

the animus of the life had been […] shaped by the demands of the writer's art. Her own energies, she felt […] had been more widely dispersed'.[47] For both Gaskell and Oliphant, this dispersal of their time and energy between their public identities and their domestic responsibilities meant that the home became a crucial space for maintaining both halves of their lives. As a result, the representation within their novels and short stories of extended domesticity became a central focus. For both women, the apparently ordinary space of extended domesticity could offer women vital room to forge their own identities, to educate themselves and to find personal fulfilment. Indeed, for both Gaskell and Oliphant, representing domesticity as a powerful and useful tool was key to their novels and short stories. It would be easy to suggest that the time and effort swallowed up by family responsibilities would, quite naturally, diminish the quality of work both women could produce. In a 2014 essay George Levine refers to Oliphant's admission of her 'inferiority to George Eliot' on the grounds of her need to write large quantities of fiction and periodical essays for economic purposes.[48] Yet, while Oliphant's substantial output did have its basis in financial need, and though she appears to willingly accept her subordinate position to Eliot, I would argue that her low assessment of her efforts is misplaced. I would suggest instead that what both she and Gaskell offered their readers within their novels and short stories were insightful and personal representations of women's lives, with central female characters whose individual experiences were the main focus. Without the 'strenuous moral intensity' of George Eliot, their work did not tend towards judgments or solutions.[49] Rather, it allowed their readers to make up their own minds.

[47] Elisabeth Jay, 'Introduction' to *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, p. 18.
[48] George Levine, 'Reading Margaret Oliphant', p. 234.
[49] Ibid., p. 234

To exemplify this point, I refer to another essay by Levine from 2016, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously: *A Country Gentleman and his Family'*, which discusses Oliphant's erroneous reputation as an anti-feminist and looks instead to her role as an important nineteenth-century writer, dedicated to the representation of ordinary experience.[50] Though Levine focusses his attentions on Oliphant, he could equally be referring to Gaskell when he discusses Oliphant's ability to 'free [her work] from the directions of a judging narrator'.[51] In other words, Gaskell's and Oliphant's novels allow their readers to watch a situation and its consequences unfold without providing solutions or offering resolutions in the same way that Eliot might. In one of Eliot's most famous works, *Middlemarch*, this difference is demonstrable. While on her honeymoon in Rome with her husband, Casaubon, Dorothea experiences a crisis of the heart when she begins to realise her error in marrying the much older man:

> Some discouragement, some faintness of heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary, is not unusual, and we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual. […] However, Dorothea was crying […] for that new real future which was replacing the imaginary drew its material from the endless minutiae by which her view of Mr Casaubon and her wifely relation, now that she was married to him, was gradually changing […] Permanent rebellion, the disorder of a life without some loving reverent resolve, was not possible to her.[52]

Levine refers to this 'interior monologue' which reveals, in aching detail, Dorothea's gradual realisation of her unsuitable marriage, and of what it means for her potentially unhappy future.[53] Yet Eliot's description of Dorothea's repugnance and disbelief at the idea of 'permanent rebellion, the disorder of life without some reverent resolve' (p. 182) is tempered by resolution and relief later in the novel, when, after Casaubon's

[50] The article I am referring to here is: Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', pp. 253-258.
[51] Ibid., p. 234.
[52] George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1997) p. 182. All further references will be made within the body of the text.
[53] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 234.

death, Dorothea marries Will Ladislaw, moves away, and enjoys a much more fulfilling life. While Eliot is concerned with what would happen if we 'had a keen vision and feeling of ordinary human life [which would be] like hearing the grass grow […] we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence' (p. 182), Oliphant's and Gaskell's novels offer it clearly. For them, the representation of the 'keen vision and feeling of ordinary human life' (p. 182) is central to their novels and short stories. Indeed, as Levine asserts, Oliphant's (and indeed, Gaskell's) novels 'very often show us' what would take place if fears such as Dorothea's were not resolved and if life continued with only the 'daily grind and daily responsibilities.'[54] What Gaskell's and Oliphant's novels and short stories give their readers is the representation of female characters from across the social scale, whose experiences vary from experiencing sexuality, to embarking upon careers within the public space. In each instance, they make the individual experience and all its 'responsibilities' central. Unlike Eliot, the need for an overarching resolution is not always necessary or possible. Instead, what makes Gaskell and Oliphant so significant as writers is their dedication to the portrayal of the individual in everyday situations and the importance they place in leaving their readers opportunity to learn and decide for themselves.

Exploring Radical Voices

In order to demonstrate and argue clearly for the important space Gaskell and Oliphant embodied in Victorian literary culture, my thesis is split into three main chapters. The first chapter identifies and locates both writers' radical voices, making clear my argument about the importance they placed in extended domesticity, and in

[54] Ibid.

constructing the significant connections between them in terms of their own roles within both domestic and public spaces. In this chapter, I begin my engagement with critics such as Dorice Williams Elliott, Patsy Stoneman, and Anne Longmuir, all of whom have attempted to find a definition for women's roles inside and outside the home and have explored the ways in which Gaskell's and Oliphant's female characters blur the boundaries between the domestic and the public spheres. The chapter explores Gaskell's and Oliphant's extensive writing careers in the context of the rise of feminism, before arguing for both writers' important roles as educators of their young female readers. I begin my exploration of Gaskell's representation of different versions of female sexuality, and the ways in which women could use the domestic space as a vital place for thought, education, rehabilitation and recuperation. To do this, I analyse passages from her novel, *Ruth* (1853), the central female character of which, Ruth Hilton, is seduced, made pregnant and abandoned before finding redemption within the Bensons' unconventional family structure. The chapter also allows me to begin my demonstration of Oliphant's dedication to the representation of the enterprising woman and the importance of female choice in terms of marriage, maternity, and a career. I analyse examples from her novel, *Kirsteen* (1890) which demonstrate Oliphant's representation of women's roles within the extended domesticity she constructs, and even beyond this into a public existence. Alongside my introduction of Oliphant, I begin my detailed engagement with George Levine's essay, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously: *A Country Gentleman and his Family'*. I consider Levine's piece here (and in Chapter Three) to begin my exploration of Oliphant's inclusion of female characters within her novels who are unfulfilled by marriage and maternity and who subvert the nineteenth-century ideal of a wife and mother.

In Chapter Two, I argue for Gaskell's role as an important nineteenth-century woman writer who worked hard in her novels and short stories to represent female sexuality as a natural part of most women's lives, moving away from conventional definitions of the 'fallen woman' and moving instead towards educating her young female readers about different aspects of sexual experience. Within the chapter, I engage with critics such as Meghan Burke Hattaway, Deborah Logan, and Suzann Bick all of whom explore Gaskell's representation of 'fallen' women and female sexuality. I also turn to the key nineteenth-century debates about prostitution and the ways in which female sexuality was defined by Victorian social commentators, in order to discover how Gaskell's representation of the 'fallen woman' differs from the conventionally condemnatory and damning verdict of many commentators in nineteenth-century society. The central basis of the chapter is my analysis of four of Gaskell's novels: *Mary Barton* (1848), *Ruth* (1853), *North and South* (1855), and *Wives and Daughters* (1866), along with the analysis of passages from her novella, *Cousin Phillis* (1864) and her short story, 'Lizzie Leigh' (1855). All of these works contain female characters who experience, approach, and acknowledge their sexuality in different ways. In my analysis of *Mary Barton*, I explore the character of Mary's aunt, Esther. Though Esther is a prostitute, Gaskell represents her radically by demonstrating the possibilities for so-called 'fallen' women to be rehabilitated within the domestic space, while also looking to critique a judgmental society which castigates women who experience sex outside of marriage. Like Esther, Lizzie falls into prostitution after falling pregnant and ending up on the streets. In my analysis of Lizzie, I explore how Gaskell represents ideas of identity and agency and rehabilitation for the sexually experienced woman. Ruth Hilton is also classed as an example of a 'fallen' woman, but she is not a prostitute; rather she, too, was the victim of a

seduction. Again, as with Esther and Lizzie, in my analysis of Ruth I look to the ways in which Gaskell represents the opportunities available to sexually experienced women for rehabilitation and recuperation with the domestic space. The more obvious 'fallen' women Gaskell creates are not the only unmarried women who attain awareness of themselves as sexual beings. Neither Margaret Hale from *North and South*, Phillis Holman from *Cousin Phillis*, or Cynthia Kirkpatrick from *Wives and Daughters* take part in a sexual act. Rather, through these three female characters, I explore how Gaskell represents women who are either growing in awareness of their sexuality, or have an understanding of it and, radically, have a level of control over it.

In my third and final chapter, as with Gaskell, I argue for Oliphant's role as an important, and radical, nineteenth-century woman writer, whose reputation as an anti-feminist has been erroneous. The focus of this chapter is Oliphant's representation of the enterprising woman, who embodies a role within extended domesticity, and even beyond it, and who uses the domestic space to forge an identity, and even to move out on to the periphery of the public space. Again, I engage with critics such as Williams Elliott, Longmuir and Stoneman, all of whom explore figures such as the woman visitor and consumer and her role in and out of the domestic space. Throughout the chapter I also engage with Levine, paying close attention to his discussion of Oliphant's important representation of women's lives outside of the ideal of marriage and maternity. I also engage with Katherine Mullin and her concept of Oliphant's radicalism through the example of the 'Working Girl' in her novels.[55] As with Gaskell, the basis of the chapter is my analysis of four of Oliphant's novels: *Miss Marjoribanks* (1865), *Phoebe Junior* (1876), *Hester* (1883), and *Kirsteen* (1890) and two of her short

[55] For Mullin's argument, see: Katherine Mullin, *Working Girls: Fiction, Sexuality, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

stories, ‘Mademoiselle’ (1889) and ‘A Girl of the Period’ (1892). In each, Oliphant provides an example of an enterprising female character who pushes the boundaries of domesticity into new directions. Though Lucilla Marjoribanks and Phoebe Beecham do not have active ‘careers’, I explore Oliphant’s representation of them as enterprising women who manage the domestic space to great effect, eventually moving into achieving a more public identity through their influence on their husband’s political careers. Claire De Castel-Sombre from the story ‘Mademoiselle’ is a governess for a middle-class English family. Though at first Claire tries to accept her role in life, her enterprising nature and a proposal from a suitor enable Claire to venture beyond the domestic space of the family’s home. Both Catherine Vernon (from *Hester*), and Kirsteen Douglas go further even than Lucilla and Phoebe by enjoying careers and even businesses of their own, while Blanche Fontaine, from 'A Girl of the Period', refuses to accept the proposal of her suitor, deciding instead to leave home and study art in Paris. In my analysis of these female characters, I explore Oliphant’s dedication to the possibilities that exist for women to enjoy successful careers, and even begin to carve out their own identities within the public space. As I hope to show, both Gaskell and Oliphant contributed a new, extended version of domesticity in fiction which allowed women readers to understand the importance of forging a personal space. Their radical message in relation to the literary culture will be examined in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter One

Gaskell, Oliphant and the Radical Extension of Domesticity

Forging a personal space

For both Gaskell and Oliphant, the domestic space was important for two reasons: firstly, the home was the centre of their family life, enabling them to take care of their children and manage their domestic responsibilities; secondly, both women used rooms within their homes to carry out most of their writing and therefore maintain their careers as professional writers. Not only did Gaskell's and Oliphant's novels and short stories communicate to their female readers the value offered by the domestic space for personal development, both women enacted such possibilities within their own lives. In her chapter which considers the balance Gaskell struck between her career and her family life, Susan Hamilton points out (and her comments could be equally valid in relation to Oliphant) 'the problem of domesticity' was writ large by early feminist thinkers of the 1970s and 1980s whenever Gaskell's work was mentioned, almost as if 'the "pull" between literary reputation and domesticity would naturally have an unbalancing effect.'[56] These concerns are echoed by critic Daun Jung in a recent article on the importance of female authors' professional titles. Regarding Gaskell's critical reception, Jung notes that 'while the motherhood/womanhood of "Mrs Gaskell" was unanimously celebrated by conservative Victorian critics, it fared not so well in modern criticism, especially among feminist scholars.'[57] It appears that, for modern critics at least, it was difficult to envision Gaskell (or indeed, any

[56] Susan Hamilton, 'Gaskell Then and Now' in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell,* ed. Jill L. Matus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 178-191, p. 185.
[57] Daun Jung, 'Critical Names Matter: "Currer Bell," "George Eliot," and "Mrs Gaskell"', *Victorian Literature and Culture,* Vol. 45, (2017), pp. 763-781, p. 778.

nineteenth-century female author) simultaneously as a successful writer and a wife and mother with a domestic identity. One of the aims of this thesis is to demonstrate that domesticity was not a 'problem' for either Gaskell or Oliphant. Instead, both authors built their highly successful literary careers and reputations around their family lives, using their domestic identities to great effect in their literature. Far from acting as a detrimental 'problem', the domestic sphere was a theme considered and built upon by both authors. Indeed, as Jung suggests, Gaskell's role as a wife and mother proved to be popular amongst contemporary critics. In an article from 1874, George Barnett Smith lauded Gaskell's care for her family, and her eagerness to balance her professional career with her domestic life:

> No matter how eager she was to complete ventures which she had in hand, and which, as literary offspring always are, were exceedingly dear to her, it is interesting to know that she was much prouder of ruling her household well, which she did in the most admirable manner, than of all that she did in those writings which have made her name so justly popular.[58]

Indeed, both Gaskell and Oliphant were keen to demonstrate that their domestic lives were as important to them as their writing careers. Equally as vital to both women, however, was to reinforce to their young female readers the notion that the domestic space offered opportunities which ventured beyond family life; it offered the chance for them to forge an identity of their own, and even a professional life. Gaskell and Oliphant suggested that not only should it be acceptable for a woman to have a family and a career if she chose (much as they did), but that it should also be acceptable for a woman to make decisions and choices about her own life. While the domestic space of the home allowed women to take care of a family, it could also allow space for them to foster their own identity and interests.

[58] George Barnett Smith, "Mrs Gaskell and Her Novels", (1874) quoted in Jung, 'Critical Names Matter', p. 776.

As I stated in the Introduction, one of the central pillars of my argument is the idea that both Gaskell and Oliphant challenged nineteenth-century ideas of correct and 'respectable' roles for women within the domestic space. While it cannot be argued that Victorian women had the social freedoms of men, both Gaskell's and Oliphant's female characters demonstrate that women did not exist solely in the domestic realm, either. Instead, both writers recognised within their writing the important value of extending domesticity in new ways and the role such an extension played in providing women with room to forge their own identities and find personal fulfilment. Throughout the thesis I will engage with critics who have explored similar debates around the public and private space in the nineteenth century, including Anne Longmuir, Patsy Stoneman, and Dorice Williams Elliott, all of whom have attempted to find a definition for women's roles both in and out of the home.

Williams Elliott's discussion focusses on Gaskell's novel *North and South* to explore what she terms as the 'social sphere' in her discussion of where women were best placed in nineteenth-century society.[59] For Williams Elliott, the 'social sphere' was the name given to the space women inhabited when they acted as visitors outside the home, particularly in a philanthropic capacity. The 'social sphere' was, according to Williams Elliott, technically positioned between the public and the private spheres, but because it involved women using their influence outside of their own home, it could be defined also as a 'public realm' where women 'us[ed] [their] 'domestic "expertise" to authorise [themselves] as […] masculinised observer[s] of the social.'[60] Crucially, according to Williams Elliott, women's role as visitors enabled them to use their influence to mediate between different groups within society, as Margaret Hale

[59] For Williams Elliott's full discussion, see: Williams Elliott, 'The Female Visitor', pp. 21-49.
[60] Ibid., p. 27.

does when she intervenes between Thornton and his workers at the beginning of the strike in *North and South*. I will engage with Williams Elliott's discussion of women's roles outside of the home and within the 'social sphere' during my consideration of Margaret Hale and also of Cynthia Kirkpatrick from Gaskell's final novel *Wives and Daughters.* I am particularly interested in continuing the exploration of the 'woman visitor' and her position within my understanding of extended domesticity. I will extend Williams Elliott's argument to explore the effect extended domesticity has on a number of Gaskell's and Oliphant's female characters and what their placement within it might mean in relation to their eventual movement into a public existence.

Anne Longmuir, too, explores women's role in connecting the public and the private spheres, focussing especially on women's roles as marketplace consumers.[61] Like Williams Elliott, Longmuir considers middle-class women philanthropists who 'extend […] the moral influence of the domestic sphere' to the subjects of their visit.[62] She then furthers her discussion to consider the apparent dangers of the 'woman shopper', whose position became questionable when she entered the marketplace. I am interested in exploring how Gaskell's and Oliphant's female characters behave within the realms of both the female visitor and the female consumer. I will extend this idea to evidence how Gaskell and Oliphant themselves had roles within the marketplace as producers of marketable goods by way of their novels. In particular I will explore how this was connected to Oliphant's creation of the businesswoman in her fiction later in the century.

Like both Williams Elliott and Longmuir, Patsy Stoneman discusses Gaskell's blurring of the boundaries between public and private existence, not only in her own

[61] For Longmuir's complete discussion, see: Longmuir, 'Consuming Subjects', pp. 237-252.
[62] Ibid., p. 238.

life, but also in her writing.[63] She looks, especially, to Gaskell's 'pragmatic negotiation' between her domestic role as a wife and mother and her more 'public' role as a marketable author.[64] Indeed, as Stoneman suggests, Gaskell's life was 'very varied […] with innumerable duties which blur the boundaries between "public and "private" existence – whether social work such as teaching in Sunday schools […] or cultural work such as placing her writing in journals […] [or] entertaining other intellectuals.[65] Like Longmuir, Stoneman uses the example of Margaret Hale to explore how Gaskell exemplified this blurring of roles and exploration of women's movement into the outskirts of the public space as a result of it. She discusses also Gaskell's representation of what she terms as 'unorthodox families'; families who do not fit into the conventional mould of mothers and fathers, but who utilise 'functional cooperation' to protect and raise children.[66] I will extend Stoneman's argument to demonstrate how both Gaskell and Oliphant pushed their female characters to the periphery of domestic space and towards the edge of the public sphere, relating this to my concept of extended domesticity, and how it enabled women to forge new roles for themselves between these boundaries.

Gaskell and Oliphant as Writers: Working From Home

In order to understand the positions occupied by Gaskell and Oliphant as writers, it is important to provide a brief overview of, and some context into, both authors' writing careers. Gaskell and Oliphant were contemporaries and both women wrote copiously

[63] For Stoneman's complete discussion, see: Stoneman, 'Gaskell, gender, and the family', pp. 131-147.
[64] Ibid., pp. 132-133.
[65] Ibid., p. 133.
[66] Ibid., p. 143.

throughout their lives. Gaskell's enthusiasm for writing is clear through her private correspondence which spans from 1832 until her death in 1865.[67] Her first published piece of literature was 'Sketches among the Poor, No 1' a poem written with her husband, William, which appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1837.[68] After this, she contributed sporadically to *Howitt's Journal* before publishing her first novel, *Mary Barton,* in 1848 when she was thirty-eight. The success of the novel brought her to the attention of Dickens, who asked Gaskell if she would write for his weekly magazine, *Household Words*. She made regular contributions to the magazine until 1858. These included several short stories such as 'Lizzie Leigh' and 'The Well of Pen-Morfa' in 1850, and the serialisation of her *Cranford* series throughout 1851 to 1853. It was the publication of Gaskell's second novel, *Ruth*, in January of 1853 which secured her place as a popular and successful author and in June of the same year, *Cranford* was published in book form. Gaskell continued her contributions to *Household Words*, serialising *North and South* between September 1854 and January 1855 and publishing the completed novel that same year. After Charlotte Brontë's death in 1855, Gaskell was tasked with writing a biography of her friend's life and *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* was published two years later in 1857. She completed and published *My Lady Ludlow* in the final year of the publication of *Household Words* before moving, with Dickens, to his new periodical, *All the Year Round,* in 1859. Her first contribution to the periodical took place that same year, with the publication of 'Lois the Witch'. The next four years also saw Gaskell contribute to *Cornhill Magazine* and *Fraser's Magazine.* The novel *Sylvia's Lovers* was published in February 1863. November 1863 to February 1864 saw the serialisation of *Cousin*

[67] The most extensive resource for Gaskell's letters is: Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Letters of Elizabeth Gaskell,* ed. J.A.V Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966)
[68] The chronology of Gaskell's career can be found in: Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), pp. 617-619.

Phillis in *Cornhill Magazine* before its eventual publication in book form in 1865. Gaskell's final and incomplete novel, *Wives and Daughters,* was serialised in *Cornhill Magazine* in August 1864. Despite Gaskell's death in November 1865, its serialisation continued, posthumously, until January 1866. It was eventually published in book form that same year. As this brief overview of her literary career demonstrates, Gaskell was a highly successful writer, frequently sought after by editors, who were keen to publish in the periodical press in order to reach as wide an audience as possible. Her success meant her radical voice could reach a broad readership.

Oliphant's literary career resembles Gaskell's, in that her output was prolific and she published widely in the periodical press. It began in 1849 when she was twenty-one with the publication of her first novel, *Passages in the Life of Margaret Maitland.*[69] Two years later in 1851 she published her first historical novel *Caleb Field: A Tale of the Puritans.* In the same year, Oliphant was introduced to the publishing firm Blackwood. This meeting began her life-long relationship with the Tory-affiliated company; a relationship which would see her contribute hundreds of articles, book reviews, short stories, and novels to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine.* The first of these publications appeared in 1852 with the serialisation of her novel *Katie Stewart.* In the same year, Oliphant married her cousin, Frank Oliphant. Over the next two years, she continued her contributions to *Maga* (the affectionate name for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*), publishing her first article in 1854. A seemingly inexhaustible ability to write saw Oliphant awarded the title 'general utility woman' from Blackwood. Over the next three years, Oliphant endured several losses including the death of two children, so it was 1858 before she released her first non-fiction book,

[69] The chronology to Oliphant's career can be found in: Margaret Oliphant, *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, ed. Elisabeth Jay (Ormskirk: Broadview Press, 2002), pp. 25-28.

Sundays. The death of Frank from tuberculosis in 1859 resulted in Oliphant increasing her already substantial literary output. In 1861 she published 'The Executor' in *Blackwood's*. This was the first of *The Chronicles of Carlingford* series and was followed over the next two years by *Salem Chapel* and *The Perpetual Curate,* also part of the *Carlingford* collection. One of the best known novels from the series, *Miss Marjoribanks,* was published in 1865. Over the next six years Oliphant continued to contribute extensively to *Blackwood's,* while also publishing *Historical Sketches of the Reign of George II* in 1869. Her final novel in the *Carlingford* series, *Phoebe Junior,* was published in 1876. Three years later, she began to write supernatural tales for the *New Quarterly Magazine.* In 1882, Oliphant continued with the ghostly theme, contributing a story of the afterlife, 'A Little Pilgrim in the Unseen' to *Macmillan's Magazine.* The next year, *Hester,* one of Oliphant's best known novels, was published. After thirty-five years of contributions to *Blackwood's,* Oliphant began a monthly series, 'The Old Saloon' for the magazine in 1887 which ran for one year. The series consisted of book reviews and articles and 'provided its author with the freedom to discuss almost any conceivable subject that fell within the parameter she set herself'.[70] From January to August of 1888, she wrote weekly articles for *St. James's Gazette*. *Kirsteen*, Oliphant's final novel, was serialised in *Macmillan's Magazine* between August 1889 and August 1890. Throughout the final five years of her life, Oliphant continued her work for *Blackwood's*, publishing another supernatural tale, 'The Library Window' in 1896 and, in the same year, replacing 'The Old Saloon' with 'The Looker-On'. Oliphant died in June, 1897. Several works were published posthumously, including *Annals of a Publishing House: William Blackwood and His*

[70] Judith van Oosterom, *The Whirligig of Time: Margaret Oliphant in her Later Years* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), p. 236.

Sons, Their Magazine and Friends in 1897. By the end of her career, Oliphant had completed three hundred book reviews and articles while simultaneously writing more than fifty short stories, twenty-five works of non-fiction and ninety-eight novels.[71]

It is clear from these brief (and certainly not exhaustive) chronologies that both writers enjoyed successful and busy publishing schedules. They shared the purpose of using their literature to bring to the forefront issues which were not always easy for a nineteenth-century audience to digest. In the next chapter, I will pay close attention to Gaskell's novels *Mary Barton* (1848), *Ruth* (1853), *North and South* (1855), and *Wives and Daughters* (1866) along with her short story 'Lizzie Leigh' (1850) and novella, *Cousin Phillis* (1864) In all of these works, Gaskell makes central the issue of female sexuality, providing examples of young female characters who experience their dawning sexuality in different ways. I will explore how these young women forge identities within extended domesticity and illustrate the ways in which Gaskell makes clear to her readers that sexuality is a normal part of every woman's life. In recent years, critics such as Meghan Burke Hattaway have explored Gaskell's treatment of female sexuality and sexual awareness. According to Hattaway, Gaskell had 'worked out, at least in fiction, a model of how to record and defend an unconventional woman's life'.[72] This defence, according to Hattaway, was a result of Gaskell's belief that the definition of a 'proper' woman was difficult to pin down. The idea of a difficulty in defining sexuality is also taken up by Deborah Logan, who suggests that the nineteenth-century idea of 'fallenness' was problematic because it did not refer solely to prostitutes, but extended also to 'any woman not manifesting the marriage-

[71] These figures can be found in, Elisabeth Jay, 'A Bed of Her Own: Margaret Oliphant', *Essay and Studies: Authors at Work: The Creative Environment*, eds. Ceri Sullivan and Graeme Harper (The English Association, 2009), pp. 49-67.
[72] Hattaway, "Such A Strong Wish For Wings", p. 672.

and-motherhood' domestic ideal.[73] In her discussion of the sexual difference between Mary Barton's mother Mary and her aunt Esther, Logan refers to Esther's place on the 'sexual spectrum'.[74] According to Logan, this 'spectrum' consists of the prostitute (like Esther) at one extreme, and the woman involved in 'legitimate marriage and motherhood' at the other.[75] For Logan, representations of nineteenth-century female sexuality tended to belong to one of these categories, with women labelled as 'fallen' if they did not fit comfortably into either. I will argue that, for Gaskell and indeed for Oliphant, extended domesticity offered room and opportunity for all women, including sexually experienced unmarried women, for rehabilitation, recovery, and personal growth. Both authors suggested that choice in marriage, maternity and even a career should be afforded to all women, no matter what their circumstance in life. Though, as Logan suggests, Gaskell's work considers women who experience their sexuality in different ways, I would argue that Gaskell did not recommend harsh judgements when it came to sexually experienced women, instead suggesting that sexuality belonged to all women, whether they were a prostitute or a wife and mother.

Gaskell links her representations of sexuality to issues of domesticity and ordinariness. Nineteenth century scholar Josie Billington's 2002 book, *Faithful Realism,* turns its attention to Gaskell's commitment to 'real' and everyday experiences within her writing. Billington discusses Gaskell's ability to explore 'the slight and seemingly incidental, while always recognizing that the apparent unimportance of these things is inseparably connected to how powerful they are'.[76] In other words, the 'seemingly incidental' instances of domesticity are crucially

[73] Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing*, p. 16.
[74] Ibid., p. 87.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Josie Billington, *Faithful Realism: Elizabeth Gaskell and Leo Tolstoy, A Comparative Study* (London: Associated University Presses, 2002), p. 49.

important, because it is from within the domestic space that women find all-important room to grow and develop. This core belief in the importance of domesticity is a crucial area of my argument. Indeed, as Billington reminds us, Gaskell's novels were as much 'guides to life' for her readers as they were works of fiction.[77] Through the situations her novels represented, Gaskell could use her radical voice to educate and inform her young readership about the diversity and variety of lives lived by women.

Novels as Education

Educating female readers was a high priority for Gaskell and indeed for Oliphant. While contemporaries such as John Ruskin saw novel-reading as little more than a 'sore temptation' which could be only 'stupefying' and 'corrupting' for the young women who engaged in it, both Gaskell and Oliphant were aware of how novels could discuss the societal injustice which existed towards women, particularly with regard to female sexuality, marriage, and opportunity.[78] Their careers as writers allowed them to incorporate these themes into their work, demonstrating not only how women were often discriminated against and treated unfairly, but also how this was not, and should not, be viewed as acceptable by society as a whole. Gaskell's and Oliphant's quiet feminism meant they could educate their young female readers by exploring, subtly, differing versions of female sexuality and female choice in marriage, children, and a career within their work. Their writing provided both authors with the opportunity to make young women aware of their situations, and also to make decisions about them. For Gaskell and Oliphant, providing education through the themes discussed in their

[77] Ibid., p. 11.
[78] John Ruskin, 'Of Queens' Gardens' in *Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2004), pp. 154-174, p. 164.

writing was as important as demonstrating that life experiences, including sexuality, were intrinsically connected to daily, seemingly ordinary, experiences. I feel it is important in this section to clarify precisely what I mean by Gaskell's and Oliphant's 'education' of their readers and why I use this term in relation to what both authors offer readers. To do this I will refer to Billington's *Is Literature Healthy?* While this book's primary focus is to explore literature's role in curing, or helping to cure, emotional trauma and pain, what her work uncovers is literature's power to reveal and make real the primal humanity, and human sense of feeling, in all of us.[79] As Billington explains:

> the 'right place' for literature is really something that literature itself creates, wherever and whenever it is read, by putting people, its readers, in the right place for the awakening of feeling and the vital beginning of thinking- the right place, that is, for being more fully alive.[80]

This central idea, that literature is capable of offering a space for vital thought and more importantly, feeling, is what I argue Gaskell and Oliphant offer their readers through their novels and short stories. Their writing educates because it sets out to help readers understand and even empathise with the situations of the diverse range of characters they are reading about. It provides them with room for what Billington considers as that all-important human level of thought and understanding, which then encourages readers to reflect on their own lives. Gaskell and Oliphant do not prescribe answers or solutions. What they do is much more powerful than that. They offer up situations which show women's lives in many forms and allow their readers to decide about, and importantly to identify with, their female characters. Their fiction creates an education process that begins with the readers themselves and is potentially more powerful than many conventional forms of education as a result. I will further engage

[79] For Billington's entire work see: Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?*
[80] Ibid., p. 11.

with Billington's ideas throughout the forthcoming chapters, exploring how both Gaskell and Oliphant create a vital space for thought and education throughout their novels and short stories.

Gaskell on Female Sexuality and Oliphant on Female Choice

Throughout this thesis, I will argue that Gaskell worked hard in her writing to explore and demonstrate differing versions of female sexuality, shifting away from conventional definitions and moving instead towards the idea that women who were deemed 'unconventional' in sexual terms could (and should) be accepted by society. Her questioning of precisely what was a 'respectable' woman led her to explore sex in different ways, demonstrating most radically that a sexually aware unmarried woman should not simply be labelled and dismissed as a 'fallen' woman, because sexuality was something which was natural to women. Gaskell educated her female readers by offering examples of female sexuality which crossed class boundaries and included not only the prostitute, but also women who experienced sexuality without literally taking part in the sexual act. Instead of representing sexuality as something which belonged solely to the realm of the prostitute, or the married woman, Gaskell's female characters showed her readers that sexual feelings could belong to all women including the readers themselves.

Women's choices and decisions in terms of marriage and the family are prevalent themes in Oliphant's work. In novels such as *Miss Marjoribanks* (1865), *Phoebe Junior* (1876), *Hester* (1883), and *Kirsteen* (1890), Oliphant provides examples of women who make decisions and have choices about who (and indeed, if) they marry and have children. She explores the possibilities for women within an

extended version of the domestic space which allows women to educate themselves and find personal fulfilment, but she also looks outside of domesticity to the public space. She suggests, radically, that educating women about the importance of choice, particularly in marriage and maternity, is crucial in helping them to forge their own identity.

Though Oliphant has historically been somewhat overlooked as a Victorian novelist, frequently dismissed as a minor, anti-feminist writer, recent critics are beginning to re-evaluate her position. George Levine in his 2016 essay, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously*: A Country Gentleman and His Family*', looks to Oliphant's ability to portray the importance of day-to-day, ordinary, domestic life and argues that this ability positions her as one of the most important nineteenth-century authors.[81] Though I will engage further with Levine in Chapter Three, which explores Oliphant's novels in closer detail, I feel it is important now for me to explain the basis of his argument. Central to his argument is the idea that Oliphant is interested in 'the desperate need of women […] for a life beyond the routine […] a life that allows for growth and change' and that this need is associated directly with her 'subversive' recognition of the limits of marriage and motherhood.[82] It is her apparent attachment to the conventionality of routine, relationships, and marriage, Levine argues, which makes Oliphant subversive, because she displays, but does not dramatise, the difficulties women face when trapped within the limitations that an unfulfilling marriage provides, or when confronted with the 'particular conditions of being a woman, a wife, and a mother.'[83] By extending the domestic space so that it becomes a space for personal fulfilment, growth and education, Oliphant provides examples of women who achieve the 'growth and

[81] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', pp. 253-258.
[82] Ibid., p. 233; p. 234.
[83] Ibid. p. 235.

change' her literature subtly illustrates. Levine suggests that Oliphant's novels, particularly her later ones, sit as comfortably with the modernists as they do with the mid-century realist writers precisely because they 'put to the most serious question' issues such as marriage and motherhood.[84] I will argue that the novels can be read as modernist not only because they represent women who have opportunities and choices beyond maternity and marriage (although this is crucially important) but also because they provide examples of women who enjoy domestic lives within extended domesticity and even combine a domestic career with the world of female enterprise, moving women towards the public space. In this thesis, I will engage with Levine's argument to demonstrate that Oliphant is indeed an important nineteenth-century author. Her ability to communicate the importance of domesticity is crucial because, like Gaskell, it enables her to educate her young female readers through experiences they will recognise in daily, conventional life. Oliphant is not afraid to explore the idea that marriage and maternity may not be sufficient for young women and that a wider range of choices are possible. As Levine argues, though Oliphant may appear to be 'conventional in her understanding of women's roles', it is her subtle 'recognition of their limits' that makes her voice so important and radical.[85] I would argue that she not only recognises these limits and depicts them, but also shows how in subtle ways women can extend their lives in new directions. Oliphant's apparently conventional stance enables her to explore this recognition to great effect because, much like Gaskell's, her novels do not prescribe solutions or make revolutionary suggestions. Instead, she allows the possibility of choice for women to be central to her novels and permits her readers to make up their own minds. Crucially, both Billington's (in *Is*

[84] Ibid., p. 236.
[85] Ibid., p. 234.

Literature Healthy?) and Levine's arguments emphasise Gaskell's and Oliphant's grounding in the importance of the domestic space within their novels, and both critics point to how important the representation of this was to both authors. Though the ordinary is often represented through what appears to be routine, domestic, and even mundane settings in the writing of both Gaskell and Oliphant, what it signifies is much more complex. The representation of the domestic space, as I will argue, offers time for reflection, recuperation and personal growth and fulfilment. Indeed, throughout their novels, several examples can be found which demonstrate how both Gaskell and Oliphant situate themselves firmly in domesticity. Both writers showed that much of life consists of a flow of ordinariness which takes place, often, within the domestic space. This flow includes life's quotidian events and is a constant presence. It exists quietly in the background during extraordinary instances including trauma, sadness, death, and upheaval, and is a continuous, reassuring presence. It is within this flow that life happened, took shape, and grew. The following extract from *Ruth* provides an example of Gaskell's dedication to representing the power of ordinary experience, and how the domestic space offers room for recuperation and growth. Abandoned by her seducer, Bellingham, and now pregnant, Ruth is spending an afternoon sewing while staying at the home of Mr and Miss Benson:

> That afternoon, as Miss Benson and Ruth sat at their work, Mrs and Miss Bradshaw called. Miss Benson was so nervous as to surprise Ruth, who did not understand the probable and possible questions which might be asked respecting any visitor at the minister's house. Ruth went on sewing, absorbed in her own thoughts, and glad that the conversation between the two elder ladies and the silence of the younger one […] gave her an opportunity of retreating into the hands of memory; and soon the work fell from her hands, and her eyes were fixed on the little garden beyond […] she saw the mountains which girdled Llan-dhu, and saw the sun rise […] just as it had done – how long ago? was it months or was it years? – since she had watched the night

> through, crouched up at *his* door. Which was the dream and which the reality? that distant life, or this? [86]

Despite Ruth's difficult situation, this scene represents clearly how important the representation of the domestic space is to Gaskell. Indeed, for Ruth, it offers crucial room for recuperation and reflection after her difficult experience with Bellingham. The stable domesticity of the Bensons' home is necessary because its calmness enables Ruth to consider what she has experienced and how that experience has affected and even changed her. Though she has been through turmoil, Ruth has now been returned to a calm, and domestic routine within a family environment. It is crucial for Gaskell that the Bensons are not a typical conventional family made up of husband, wife and children. Instead, Mr and Miss Benson are brother and sister. As Stoneman reminds us, Gaskell's novels often include 'unorthodox "families" [who do] not depend on a conventional concept of a heterosexual family, but rather on functional cooperation'.[87] Indeed, though the Bensons and Ruth represent an unusual and indeed 'unorthodox' family set-up, Gaskell demonstrates that they are a family nonetheless. Through them, she attempts to extend understandings of the domestic sphere, demonstrating that domesticity can go beyond representations of the 'ideal' family to also include familial constructs that do not fit into the typical mould. The Bensons are not conventional, and nor is Ruth's situation, but Gaskell is radical in showing readers that this should not make them any less acceptable.[88] Ruth's rescue by the Bensons and their

[86] Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), p. 149. All further references will be made in the body of the text.
[87] Stoneman, 'Gaskell, gender and the family', p. 143.
[88] A number of Oliphant's novels, too, contain families which could be deemed as 'unorthodox'. In *Hester*, for example, Catherine Vernon acts as the head of her extended and somewhat fragmented family, many of whom look to Catherine for financial (and familial) support. As the head of her family bank, as well as the head of her family, Oliphant places Catherine in an authoritative, and unconventional situation. In Chapter Three, I will explore Oliphant's representation of domesticity in greater detail, looking to how business acumen combined with a role in the domestic plays an important part in many of her female characters lives.

subsequent welcoming of her into their home is an extraordinary act, but its extraordinary strength comes directly from the home which offers space and time for Ruth to reflect on her situation and to use what she has experienced to learn, grow, and move into the future. The simple act of sewing, (something which she did as a career before her 'fall') suggests the cyclical, ever-present nature of the flow of the ordinary in a domestic context. Though Ruth has experienced sadness and upheaval and will experience change once again when her child is born, her return to this everyday act demonstrates the restorative nature of the domestic space. Though Ruth's job as a seamstress left her vulnerable to meeting dissolute young men such as Bellingham, and therefore signalled the beginning of her troubles, the stable domestic space provided by the Bensons' home transforms her sewing into a positive act. Gaskell's radicalism is heard loudly in the extract, because she demonstrates to her readers that despite her sexual experience out of wedlock, Ruth's, (and indeed all women's) role in the domestic space can be valid, restorative, and transformative.

While immersed in her work, Ruth is given time to become 'absorbed in her own thoughts […] retreating into the hands of memory' (p. 149). The act of sewing provides Ruth with the opportunity to reflect on all that has been and all that is to come, while located in the safety of the Bensons' domesticity. Though the events leading up to this moment: her seduction; loss of home and position; abandonment; pregnancy; and eventual rescue by the Bensons have been traumatic for Ruth, Gaskell shows that most experiences, no matter how seemingly extraordinary, cannot overpower the recuperative effects of ordinary domestic experience. This is evidenced further when Ruth questions the time-span of the recent events in her life. She wonders 'how long ago? was it months or was it years?' (p. 149) since she was last in Bellingham's company. She asks which part of her life 'was the dream and which the

reality? that distant life, or this?' (p. 149). Despite Ruth's harrowing experience with Bellingham, that part of her life exists only as a memory in the form of her son, Leonard. Her return to the ordinary warmth of the Bensons' home, and the simple, everyday act of sewing, almost removes (or at the very least, reduces) the trauma of the past through the restoring power of domesticity. It also enables her to look after Leonard without imagining him as the product of her 'fall'. Though her seduction at the hands of Bellingham cannot be fully erased, the healing power of domesticity means Ruth can provide the best start for her son, transforming the effects of her 'fall' into a positive future for him. Indeed, Gaskell makes clear for her readers how Ruth's healing takes place, almost before their eyes, as they read. As Billington notes, 'literature does something deeper […] than *recover* an inner voice. It can summon a voice that does not exist under the ordinary conditions of life.'[89] Indeed, Ruth summons her 'inner voice' as she questions the events of her past. As she does this, she separates her troubled past from her stable present in the domestic space of the Bensons' home. Through the representation of Ruth's experience, Gaskell demonstrates to her readers that while located in the inclusiveness of the domestic space, there is room for all women, including unmarried women who are sexually experienced, to forge a new version of their identity and move forward with their lives through the rehabilitation offered by extended domesticity.

An extract from later in the novel, after Leonard's birth, is concerned equally with the importance imbued in domesticity. Ruth and Sally are spending an afternoon at home together while Mr and Miss Benson visit a friend:

> One afternoon […] Mr and Miss Benson set off to call upon a farmer […] and Ruth and Sally were left to spend a long afternoon together. At first, Sally was busy in her kitchen, and Ruth employed herself in carrying her baby out into the garden. It was now nearly a year since she came to the Benson's; it seemed

[89] Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?*, p. 106. Emphasis in the original text.

> like yesterday, and yet as if a lifetime had gone between. The flowers were budding now, that were all in bloom when she came down, on the first autumnal morning, into the sunny parlour […] Ruth knew every plant now; it seemed as though she had always lived here, and always known the inhabitants of the house […].
>
> But the strange change was in Ruth herself. She was conscious of it though she could not define it, and she did not dwell upon it. Life had become significant and full of duty to her. (*Ruth*, pp. 190-191)

Here, Ruth and Leonard are spending time once again in the domestic, ordinary space of the family garden which enables Ruth to reflect again on all that has passed since her arrival with the Bensons. As in the earlier extract, when Ruth was sewing with Miss Benson, the cyclical nature of the ordinary is demonstrated by the repeated 'budding' of the flowers that were in bloom 'when she [Ruth] came down, on that first autumnal morning' (p. 190) spent in the Bensons' home. Despite the uncertainty which existed before Leonard's arrival, time after his birth has continued as it ever did. Though 'it was now nearly a year' (p. 190) since Ruth was taken in by the Bensons, 'it seemed like yesterday, and yet as if a lifetime had gone between' (p. 190). The ordinary simplicity of the garden and the gradual changing of the seasons transforms the passing of time into the perpetual flow of the ordinary. Its constancy means that Ruth's life has returned to a domestic routine despite the difficulties she once faced. The calm ordinariness of the Bensons' home and garden has turned both places into a stable family environment for Ruth and her son. In this scene, the ordinary reveals its restorative power through Ruth, who, despite earlier hardship, now feels her life is 'significant and full of duty' (p. 191). The constancy of the ordinary, calm space of the home and indeed the love of the Bensons, has enabled Ruth to find strength and stability. This sense of constancy has in turn created a strength which is reflected through Ruth in a physical way:

> […] although she had lived in a very humble home, yet there was something about either it or her, or the people amongst whom she had been thrown during the last few years, which had so changed her, that whereas six or seven years

> ago, you would have perceived that she was not altogether a lady by birth and education, yet now she might have been placed among the highest in the land, and would have been taken by the most critical judge for their equal, although ignorant of their conventional etiquette – an ignorance which she would have acknowledged on a simple childlike way, being unconscious of any false shame. (*Ruth*, p. 209).

It is the simplicity of the Bensons' 'humble home' (p. 209) and their acceptance of Ruth as a part of it which has 'so changed her' (p. 209) from an abandoned and frightened young girl into somebody who 'might have been placed among the highest in the land' (p. 209). Once again, Gaskell reiterates the restorative power of the domestic space which, over the 'six or seven' (p. 209) years since Ruth's arrival has provided her with the comfort and normality that its acceptance provides and has transformed her earlier identity of a demoralised and 'fallen' young woman into one much more confident and able. Her sense of love and duty towards Leonard and the Bensons has reduced the trauma of her past and has even served to transform Ruth's appearance from the young girl who 'was not altogether a lady by birth or education' (p. 209) into somebody who the 'most critical judge' (p. 209) would have deemed as 'their equal' (p. 209). The stability of the family environment has provided Ruth with strength and support which transcends her troubled past. Ruth's transformation enables Gaskell to demonstrate again that though she has experienced sex, and has been judged harshly as a result, her time within the extended domesticity of the Bensons' home has offered rehabilitation and the opportunity for a future which transcends the troubles of the past.

Oliphant's writing, too, returns frequently to the important transformations of women's lives which can be found in domesticity. In a scene from the novel *Kirsteen,* Kirsteen Douglas wakes in Miss Jean's house after an arduous journey from her family home in Scotland to London. Kirsteen makes the decision to leave her family home

and forge a career of her own when her father arranges for her to marry a much older man:

> The journey over and the end attained! This was the thought that came to Kirsteen's mind as she opened her eyes upon the morning – not so tired, she reflected, as she had been at the inn at Arrochar, at Mrs Macfarlane's, after her first day's walk. Was that a year ago? she asked herself […] the strange passage in the dark through unknown London, and finally this little room in which she opened her eyes, lying still and closing them again to enjoy the sensation of rest, then opening them to see the yellow fog of the morning like a veil against the two small windows already shrouded by curtains […].
>
> Her bundle had been carefully opened, her linen laid out in a drawer half open to show her where to find it, her second gown hung carefully up, shaken out of its creases by a skilful hand.[90]

Like Ruth, Kirsteen has returned to the safety and comfort of the home after her 'strange passage' (p. 186) from her family in Scotland to her new employer Miss Jean's residence in London. Oliphant lists the stages of Kirsteen's journey as she escapes from a marriage her father would impose upon her: from 'the inn at Arrochar', to 'Mrs Mcfarlane's' (p. 186), and her travels through the 'unknown' (p. 186) city before finally allowing her to end in the simplicity of Miss Jean's 'little room' (p. 186), attached to, but also separate from, Kirsteen's new workplace. Kirsteen states that the 'end' of her journey has been 'attained' (p. 186). Indeed, her journey's end has brought her to the stability of Miss Jean's domestic space. Though, like Ruth, Kirsteen has experienced something out of the ordinary in her move away from her father's home and her long solitary journey from Scotland to London, it is the unremarkable little room she comes to rest in which offers her 'a room of her own' in which to think and take stock of her situation. Again, like Ruth, Kirsteen questions the passage of time since the beginning of her journey. She asks herself 'Was that a year ago?' (p. 186) since she set out on her travels from her family home in Scotland. Despite her

[90] Margaret Oliphant, *Kirsteen* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2010), p. 186. All further references will be made in the body of the text.

extraordinary journey, Kirsteen's room within the extended domesticity of Miss Jean's home demonstrates the opportunities for recuperation which are offered by the domestic space. Like Ruth, Kirsteen begins the forging of her future identity within the fortifying room in a domestic context. Away from the stifling boundaries of her father's patriarchal version of the domestic space, Kirsteen is free to find personal fulfilment in Miss Jean's extended domesticity, which provides her with space for thought and development and, importantly, to forge her identity as a professional woman.

In his exploration of Oliphant's novel, *A Country Gentleman and His Family*, Levine focusses especially on her attention to 'the deadening position of women in marriage'.[91] Though the novel is, at heart, a kind of 'upside down Bildungsroman' based on the life of its troubled male protagonist, Theo Warrender, Oliphant's most compelling focus is her acutely drawn demonstration of the 'ladies' disenchantment […] from a long experience of the inadequacy and progressive disempowering of marriage itself.'[92] Through Kirsteen's departure from her 'disempowering' and repressive family home into the progressiveness of the extended domesticity of her employer Miss Jean's home, Oliphant demonstrates, radically, that women should not have to enter into a marriage which would prevent their personal growth and achievement.[93] By rejecting a marriage that is not on her terms, Kirsteen forges her own identity in the extended, and fulfilling, domesticity of Miss Jean's home.

Like Ruth, Kirsteen does not represent the conventional Victorian woman in the home. Instead, through her depiction of Kirsteen, Oliphant represents a woman who makes choices about her life. She chooses not to marry and leaves her family

[91] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 239.
[92] Ibid., p. 243.
[93] Ibid.

home to make her own way in the world. As a result, Kirsteen uses the domestic space of Miss Jean's home to forge a new identity for herself as a working woman, independent of her family. While she is not a wife and mother, her position in the domestic space is an equally valid one. Through Kirsteen, Oliphant demonstrates that the domestic was not exclusively the sole domain of the conventional, 'feminine' Victorian woman but could belong to, and be important to, all women, regardless of their experiences in life.

In a later section of the novel, the importance of accessing a space for recuperation and even reinvention is demonstrated again. Here, Miss Jean and Kirsteen sit together at the end of a busy day in the workroom:

> It was a quiet house when all was over in the establishment – the workrooms closed and dark, the workwomen all dispersed to their homes or asleep in their garrets – in which the mistress of the household and her young guest were alone. They still occupied this relation to each other, Miss Jean treating Kirsteen with great ceremony as an honoured stranger, notwithstanding that her distinguished visitor was so condescending as to take part in the conduct of her work. When supper was over, Miss Jean drew her chair towards the window which was open […] The window admitted nothing more sweet than the faint and smoky lamplight of the streets into the room to mingle with that of the candles […] Nevertheless, Miss Jean was able to say that the evening air coming in was sweet.
>
> 'And that reminds me, Miss Kirsteen,' she said, 'that ye have been quite a long time in London, three months and more. And how do you like what you have seen?'
>
> 'I like it very well,' said Kirsteen […] for a town it is a very good town – better than Glasgow, which is the only other town I ever saw.' (*Kirsteen*, pp. 214-215).

After spending 'three months and more' (p.215) at Miss Jean's 'establishment' (p. 214) Kirsteen has made her home in London. This intensely domestic scene with the two women sitting 'alone' together at the end of another busy day in the workroom, demonstrates how they have become comfortable in each other's company and inhabit an all-important 'room of their own' in Miss Jean's house. Here, as Gaskell did in *Ruth*, Oliphant reiterates how domesticity offers time and space for a kind of therapy

and stability. Though Miss Jean still treats Kirsteen as an 'honoured stranger' (p. 214), she also accepts the young woman into the workroom of her shop to take part in the 'conduct of her work' and her business. This allows Kirsteen to begin to forge an independent life as an enterprising young woman with an identity in the public space. Miss Jean and Kirsteen sit together in the tranquillity of the 'quiet house' (p. 214). Now, Kirsteen is more than just another worker or guest. Her admittance into Miss Jean's private domestic space once the 'workwomen [had] dispersed to their homes or [fallen] asleep in their garrets' (p. 214) demonstrates her special place within the home. Like Ruth, who found stability in the domesticity of the Bensons' home and garden, so Kirsteen has found it within the extended domesticity of Miss Jean's home. And just as Ruth experienced a personal change when she had been imbued with the stability she found at the Bensons', so Miss Jean's home and business have helped Kirsteen settle into a new independent life away from her family home, and in the progressiveness of a form of extended domesticity. Leaving her family home helps Kirsteen to build the confidence and strength she needs when she eventually returns to confront her father. It is through leaving and then returning that Kirsteen demonstrates how important the domesticity of Miss Jean's home is. Its space offers Kirsteen time to not only reflect on what leaving her family home means in terms of her independent future life, but also to begin her move towards growth and independence while within it. This means that when Kirsteen eventually returns to her father's home, she has increased in confidence and experience. Indeed, often within her novels, Oliphant represents the conventional, biological family as less effective than the families of choice which are established, an example of which is the important familial bond Kirsteen forges with Miss Jean. Gaskell, too, explores the value of the alternative family unit through the example of the Bensons' and Ruth. Both authors

complicate the conventional domestic space by demonstrating that the father, mother and children set-up is not necessary (and sometimes less effective) than a family which is chosen and developed, and which offers more unconventional types of support. In addition to this, both Gaskell and Oliphant demonstrate the possibilities of the domestic space as temporary as women move from one home to another. This is demonstrated through Kirsteen who moves from the oppressive version of domesticity offered by her father, to the much more progressive extended domesticity of Miss Jean.

As these passages demonstrate, Gaskell and Oliphant proved that the representation of domesticity, particularly extended domesticity, was crucial. Indeed, through their novels, Gaskell and Oliphant forged a new literary space for themselves; a space which allowed them to represent how in their own experiences domesticity and family were as important to them as their writing careers. Indeed, Gaskell's and Oliphant's carving of their own literary space is interesting. As a committed wife and mother, Oliphant's writing often appeared to be a secondary pursuit to that of looking after her husband and children. As if to highlight the fact, her *Autobiography* does not contain many detailed references to her writing. Instead, Oliphant's memoir charts her life with her family, recalling, often in great detail, the grief she endured after the death of several of her children and her husband, Frank. As a widow left with dependent children, and an extended family of her brothers, nieces and nephews to support, the *Autobiography* demonstrates her as a woman who was fully aware of her responsibility to others and who was herself the head of an unconventional family set up, similar to those she represented in her novels and short stories. Throughout, she notes that financial necessities meant she was 'obliged to work pretty hard […] to meet all the too great expenses of the house […] I never did nor could […] hesitate for a moment

as to what had to be done. It had to be done, and that was enough […].'[94] For Oliphant, writing and, more importantly, being paid for her writing, was imperative, particularly because she was the sole breadwinner of her household. She even notes that the publishing of her *Autobiography* was not so much for her readers' pleasure, but was instead 'with the aim (no evil aim) of leaving a little more money for Denny', her niece.[95] Oliphant's approach to the financial benefits of her writing appears to show a woman who was concerned less with her own comfort, and more with the idea of leaving her family financially stable on the event of her death. There is no doubt that her large literary output was, in part, to do with her financial situation, but Oliphant is keen to suggest that this is not because she wishes to be extravagant. Instead, her concern to leave money behind for Denny represents what Levine terms as typical of her grounding in 'the daily grind and the daily responsibilities' which are so prevalent in her work.[96] As important as it was for Oliphant to write about subjects that could inform and educate her readers, it was also important for her to live that example in a practical way by demonstrating that money was, and always would be, a necessary and unavoidable daily consideration. She wanted to provide her young female readers with an example of a woman who understood the importance of being socially capable. By enacting this herself, Oliphant demonstrated that a woman could take on the responsibility of a family, while simultaneously managing a career.

Gaskell, too, did not shy away from sharing her experiences as a professional woman, wife, and mother. In a letter from 1862 in which a young, aspiring author wrote to Gaskell asking for her professional opinion of a piece of writing, she does not hesitate to offer some practical help. When she notes that the woman mentions she has

[94] Oliphant, *The Autobiography*, p. 179.
[95] Ibid., p. 140.
[96] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 234.

recently given birth for the second time and is finding the challenge of writing while simultaneously looking after two small children increasingly difficult, Gaskell writes:

> The exercise of a talent or power *is* always a great pleasure; but one should weigh well whether this pleasure may not be obtained by the sacrifice of some duty […] Besides viewing the subject from a solely artistic point of view a good writer of fiction must have *lived* an active & sympathetic life if she wishes her books to have strength & vitality in them. When you are forty […] you will write ten times as good a novel as you could do now, just because you will have gone through so much more of the interests of a wife and mother.[97]

Here, Gaskell indicates that a domestic life can be the stuff of fiction, and that childcare and domestic duties are 'active' pursuits which can be linked to creativity. Being a wife and mother herself, Gaskell offers advice on the best way for the young woman to manage her time, so she is able to carry out her 'many household duties' while also maintaining her literary pursuits.[98] The letter is a touching example of how Gaskell, despite her success as an author, placed her life as a wife and mother on a par with her writing career. As Stoneman notes, referring to Gaskell's informal letter-writing style, '[her letters] leave us with an impression of a woman who was […] deeply involved with every aspect of domestic life and also humorously aware that her negotiations of it were sometimes less than orthodox'.[99]

Though domesticity was generally seen as orthodox for Victorian women, Gaskell and Oliphant demonstrate its potentially unorthodox capacity for creativity and action. Indeed, as much as the letter demonstrates Gaskell's kindness, it also shows her belief that a woman could enjoy intellectual pursuits at the same time as taking care of her family. She suggests in her letter, as she and Oliphant do in their fiction, that the domestic space could be extended so that a woman could fulfil her

[97] Gaskell, *The Letters of Elizabeth Gaskell*, Letter 515 to Unknown, September 25th, 1862, pp. 693-696.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Stoneman, 'Gaskell, gender, and the family', p. 133.

own intellectual potential while she takes care of her family. Her advice to the young woman to 'soap and soak' her dirty linen before washing, along with 'preparing a dinner & putting it on to cook slowly' (Letter 515 [1862], pp. 693-696) provides a fascinating insight into a woman whose domestic existence was as vital to her as the reception of her novels. Her attention to these ordinary and practical details of day-to-day life presents us with an author who used her experiences as a 'wife and mother' to add insight and reality to her literary work. Here, Gaskell is attending to what Billington calls 'the slight and seemingly incidental' matters of life.[100] Though the planning ahead of family dinners and the soaking of dirty laundry may seem trivial, Gaskell is very aware of the importance of these seemingly inconsequential daily matters in relation to the much larger matter of looking after her family, and therefore maintaining her private life. By advising the young woman about how to ease the burden of her chores, Gaskell is simultaneously helping her to find more time for writing. She is also reinforcing how these domestic matters are equally as important to her as her writing career, and that the role of a wife and mother is as significant as her role as an author. Gaskell's emphasis on the idea that in order to be a successful writer of fiction, an author must have '*lived* an active & sympathetic life' reinforces my argument that living ordinary life experiences were crucial for Gaskell the writer, these she gained largely from her life as Gaskell the wife and mother. Billington notes that Gaskell's family experiences provided her with 'a kind of apprenticeship in […] the energetic absorption in concerns, modes, experiences *not* one's own'.[101] Certainly, in order for literature to educate the less experienced, and for it to seem authentic, Gaskell felt that authors must themselves have a wealth of life experience; however,

[100] Billington, *Faithful Realism*, p. 49.
[101] Ibid., p. 66.

this experience could be domestic and 'ordinary'. Both Gaskell and Oliphant used their experiences as wives and mothers to inform their writing, while their understanding of the ordinariness of daily existence helped them to inform and educate the women who were reading their novels and short stories.

Indeed, for both Gaskell and Oliphant, their multiple identities as writers, wives, and mothers were impossible to separate. In a letter to Eliza Fox in 1850, Gaskell discusses how she reconciled the 'warring members' of her many 'Mes'.[102] These 'Mes' included her identity as a 'true Christian', her role as a 'wife and mother', and her 'self with a full taste for beauty and convenience'.[103] Certainly, her assimilation of her private day-to-day life with her public life as an author demonstrates a woman who was used to combining several roles at once, with each role playing an equally important part. For Billington, this assimilation of selves meant that Gaskell 'had […] to accept that even what is most trivially personal will at times be primary […].'[104] While it is true that for Gaskell 'personal' matters often did take precedence in her schedule, like Oliphant, she found the small, daily, ordinary events made up the majority of life, and both women explored this idea within their writing. It is important to note here however, that it was their protection of their identities as 'respectable' family women that meant Gaskell and Oliphant considered carefully how they expressed their views within their fiction. The discussions of female independence and sexuality were difficult themes for women writers to explore in the mid nineteenth century, and both Gaskell and Oliphant were aware they would be risking their reputations (and their incomes) if they made their radical views overtly clear within their fiction. As Solveig C. Robinson has pointed out, though Oliphant's

[102] Gaskell, *Letters*, Letter 69 to Eliza Fox, April 1850, pp. 107-110.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Billington, *Faithful Realism*, p. 88.

critical voice did alter as the century progressed, she was aware, particularly early on in her career, that if she wanted to continue her publishing relationship with Blackwood's, she would have to maintain a 'masculine mask in her criticism'.[105] Oliphant was aware that she needed to please her editors if she was to keep her paid position as a reviewer and contributor of articles and fiction for a major, but conservative, periodical and we must bear this in mind when we read her early reviews and literary criticism. As Robinson continues, 'While much of [Oliphant's] criticism takes a relatively conservative stance this likely reflects her catering to the tastes of *Maga*'s editors as much as her own opinions.'[106] Oliphant's pragmatism suggests that she knew she must be careful not to appear too radical in her opinions if she was to be a successful, published author and simultaneously keep her Tory-affiliated editors happy. While this goes some way to explain why Oliphant was so often thought of as an anti-feminist writer, a deeper reading of her work reveals a different, more radical message.

Gaskell, too, was aware of the consequences of writing about subjects which were deemed unsuitable for a female author. As Uglow states, Gaskell often described her stories as 'growing almost of [their] own accord'.[107] By distancing herself in this way from the formation of her novels' subject matters, as if they had other-worldly origins, independent of her own thoughts and feelings, Gaskell was 'usually absolved […] of responsibility.'[108] Gaskell's place as a 'celebrity in her own right', which occurred after the publication of *Mary Barton,* meant that for years afterwards she had

[105] Solveig C. Robinson, 'Expanding a "Limited Orbit": Margaret Oliphant, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and the Development of a Critical Voice', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Vol. 38, (2005), pp. 199-220, p. 199.
[106] Solveig C. Robinson (ed.), *A Serious Occupation: Literary Criticism by Victorian Women Writers* (Ormskirk: Broadview, 2003), p. 145.
[107] Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, p. 212.
[108] Ibid.

a growing reputation to maintain.[109] In many ways, this reputation was double-edged. On the one hand, it enabled Gaskell to take part in what Uglow terms as her 'Unitarian belief in the moral function of art and in the duty to state the truth and expose social evils'.[110] On the other hand, it meant that if she wished to continue 'briskly counting her earnings [and] studying her contracts' (in other words, enjoying all the benefits of being a successful author), Gaskell would have to be wary of how she framed her personal response to what she deemed to be society's immoralities.[111] This difficulty is evidenced in a letter to Anne Robson in 1853, written after the publication of *Ruth*, a novel which was received by conservative readers as shocking in its positive depiction of an unmarried mother. In the letter, Gaskell stresses that though she expected the less than favourable reviews of her novel, she had 'spoken out my mind in the best way I can […] what was meant so earnestly *must* do some good, though perhaps not all the good, or not the *very* good I meant'.[112] Despite Gaskell's reiteration that the themes within the book were her way of speaking her mind about social ills, she qualifies this idea by noting, 'Of course it is a prohibited book in *this*, as in many other households; not a book for young people, unless read with someone older.'[113] It is clear from her words (and the suggestion that she does not deem the novel suitable for her own young daughters) that Gaskell is in conflict. She wants to speak her mind, but she is aware that appearing too radical in her views would be a risk to her ever-increasing literary reputation, and all its benefits. The unfavourable reaction to *Ruth* meant that Gaskell learned a valuable lesson about how to broach 'dangerous' topics

[109] Ibid., p. 233.
[110] Ibid., p. 236.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Gaskell, *Letters*, Letter 148 to Anne Robson, Before January 1853, pp. 220-222.
[113] Ibid.

in her later writing. She discovered that she must employ more subtlety in her representations of women's unorthodox lives if she wanted her novels to be successful.

Their careers as professional writers with identities within the public sphere gave Gaskell and Oliphant the opportunity to discuss women's positions in society, but while debates surrounding feminism began to gain momentum in the mid-Victorian period, both women felt they had to temper their radical views. The subject matter of their novels and short stories, often based on stories of female sexual awakening or fall, and women's right to make their own choices in choosing who to marry, what employment to aim for, and whether to venture into public life, should have made them ideal candidates to take part in, and even champion, the feminist cause: the reality was very different, however. If Gaskell and Oliphant wanted to educate their young female readers, while simultaneously maintaining their careers and reputations, they would have to find alternative ways to communicate their 'radical' thoughts through their writing. Their radicalism did not mean the adoption of a strident voice in the changing political landscape. Instead, their approach was subtler, quieter, more complex. It involved the representation and exploration within their writing of the flow of ordinariness which existed within everybody's lives. This representation was more crucial than ever in the changing political landscape regarding women because it enabled Gaskell and Oliphant to bring to the forefront feminist issues by showing that female experience, female sexuality, and choice in women's lives were already happening and taking shape every day. If they could demonstrate this, and through this demonstration influence their female readership, then their radical thoughts, though subtly communicated, would be undeniably powerful.

The Rise of Nineteenth-Century Feminism

By the mid-nineteenth-century feminist organisations such as the Langham Place Group, led by Barbara Bodichon, were providing women with the opportunity not only to speak out against social injustice, but also to begin to make their voices heard in terms of women's access to politics and education.[114] As Barbara Caine asserts in her extensive study of feminism in England, by the 1850s, the creation of such groups as that in Langham Place, along with other 'feminist campaigns [led to a] great expansion in theoretical discussions of women's rights and wrongs, their needs and entitlements, and their abilities and weaknesses.'[115] Feminists such as Frances Power Cobbe were 'closely connected with philanthropy' (as Gaskell herself was) and saw it as their duty to 'campaign on behalf of their suffering sisters'.[116] Such active feminism saw women's roles changing dramatically, and the demand for access to education, political representation and a public voice was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Amongst these feminist discussions, arguably one of the most prolific debates was that relating to the sexual double standard. Josephine Butler worked tirelessly for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864 and 1866. These Acts meant that any woman deemed by the authorities to be a prostitute could be subjected to an intrusive and often painful medical examination. If she was found to be infected with venereal disease, she would be confined to a lock-hospital until the infection had cleared. For Butler, the Acts placed the blame for the transmission of sexual diseases

[114] For more information on Barbara Bodichon, see Nestor, 'Negotiating a Self', pp. 155-64.
[115] Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1890* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 93.
[116] Ibid., p. 127.

squarely with women, and removed any level of culpability from the men involved. For Butler as for many of the other mid-Victorian feminists, 'the prostitute symbolized women's oppression through her lack of educational and employment opportunities and her absolute dependence upon male sexual desire for her survival.'[117] As a result of campaigns such as Butler's, women's sexuality had been placed at the forefront of the feminist fight. The focus on mid-nineteenth-century female sexuality did not just centre on feminists' demands that a woman should have the right to control her own body (although this was important), it also extended to her right to be viewed as equal to her male counterparts. Though a woman's domain was deemed by many conservative thinkers such as Ruskin to be within the private sphere of the home, feminist debates (and indeed the feminists leading them) were moving out of this domain and into the public world. This further shift into the public sphere saw feminist journalists such as Cobbe publicise and promote women's causes in pamphlets, periodicals, and in the press. As Susan Hamilton explains in her exploration of Cobbe's relationship with the press, she 'spoke to an audience as much composed of non-feminist readers, men and women, as those already or about to be convinced by Victorian feminism's political analysis'.[118] Victorian women in the public sphere were displaying the skills of persuasion in debate, skills which writers like Gaskell and Oliphant were developing in different ways in their fiction.

Indeed, writing, it seemed, offered the perfect platform for women not only to publicise the feminist cause, but to also prove that what they had to say was just as legitimate as the arguments of their male counterparts. Despite this, making a career out of writing was not a simple task for a woman in the mid nineteenth century.

[117] Ibid., p. 109. For a broader exploration of Josephine Butler's campaign see Caine, *English Feminism*, pp. 108-115 and also Margaret Forster, *Significant Sisters: The Grassroots of Active Feminism 1839-1939* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1984), pp. 169-202.
[118] Hamilton, *Frances Power Cobbe and Victorian Feminism*, p. 23.

Nonetheless, writing such as Cobbe's demonstrated the importance of women's journalism, and the power it had to enter homes through newspapers, pamphlets and journals. Because Gaskell and Oliphant were using their novels to educate and inform a general readership, particularly a female readership, they had to be much subtler with the ideas they communicated than did overt feminists like Cobbe who tended to address intellectuals and other educated groups. Oliphant manages to avoid the exposure of her radical ideas about women and paid employment by maintaining what Levine terms her outwardly 'conventional […] understanding of women's roles in marriage and motherhood' in her novels.[119] By seemingly upholding views on marriage in her fiction which conform to convention, Oliphant is able to provide an insight into the 'psychological oppression' which affects women who are trapped in unfulfilled relationships.[120] Because she avoids using a 'judging narrator', Oliphant allows her readers to be guided by her examples of how these confined women deal with their situations, without ever openly admitting that the radical views are her own.[121] Again, Oliphant is permitting her readers to make up their own minds and their own decisions, subliminally educating without ever being blatantly opinionated. Gaskell, too, manages to avoid exposure by never stating openly how she personally feels about the expression of female sexuality. Instead, like Oliphant, Gaskell's novels provide numerous examples of women who, according to Logan, reflect her 'signature appeal to compassion'.[122] Gaskell stages her novels as a response to the Unitarian drive to do good and this enables her to demonstrate her understanding of female sexuality as existing on a broad spectrum from 'fallenness' to marriage, while never openly stating her own opinions or making judgements. This range, which includes women

[119] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 234.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing*, p. 21.

of all ages and from all walks of society who experience sexuality in different ways, means that Gaskell is able to show her readers that female sexuality is an ordinary aspect of life for women.

An Alternative Space for Radical Voices

Of course, it would be naïve to suggest that Gaskell and Oliphant were the only two authors who wrote about women, and changing attitudes towards women, in the nineteenth century. Writers such as Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Brontë and George Eliot also created novels centred on powerful female characters. Female sexuality and the condition of women were woven throughout their work and they did not shy away from exploring the difficulties and controversies attached to the subject of the nineteenth-century woman. Nonetheless, I would argue that Gaskell and Oliphant occupied an alternative space from their contemporaries. Oliphant did not believe her own literary career would be remembered 'in the same breath with George Eliot'; indeed, she failed to see the talent she had, as well as the importance of that talent, for describing what Levine so powerfully terms as her 'direct and faithful confrontation of ordinary experience'.[123] While Eliot was concerned with an overwrought need for feeling and 'analysis' in her novels, Oliphant left her readers with the opportunity to linger on the ordinariness of the experiences they were reading about.[124] Billington, too, compares Gaskell's similar ability 'to let [situations] be' within her writing, rather than 'think[ing] and […] talk[ing] her way out of the problem as George Eliot […] feels bound to do.'[125] I would argue that this acceptance of the

[123] Oliphant, *The Autobiography,* p. 51; Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 233.
[124] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 233.
[125] Billington, *Faithful Realism,* p. 105.

ordinary, and avoidance of over-explanation, are crucial to the writing of both Gaskell and Oliphant because for them it is within the ordinariness of day-to-day situations that life is revealed. It is vital for both authors that their young female readers recognise their own situations within the representations of domestic life they offered in their novels and short stories. As Billington notes, Gaskell (and I would argue that this also the case for Oliphant) is 'a writer of experience [who] unlike […] Eliot, who always needs to rescue form, […] simply finds it […] emerging from content […].'[126] It is the ability to allow reality to 'emerge' from within their writing that makes both women so successful in their discussion of radical ideas. They discuss real-life situations and because of this, they are able to explore and represent 'difficult' themes such as prostitution, sex and pregnancy outside of marriage, and women alone and away from their homes and families, without bringing reproach upon themselves. By allowing the gradual development of radical themes such as female sexuality and women choosing careers to emerge from their writing, both Gaskell and Oliphant provide their readers with representations of ordinary situations while actually discussing extraordinary subjects. As Levine notes, Oliphant (and arguably Gaskell) is 'conventional and unconventional at the same time', and it is precisely between these two poles that she situates herself so successfully.[127] Within this space, she guides and educates her readers, never loudly stating her own position, but instead choosing to provide them with the theoretical opportunity of choice which she weaves through her novels. Levine could be referring to Gaskell as much as Oliphant when he discusses Oliphant's ability to 'register experience largely proscribed by high Victorian fiction' and the success she has in the 'telling of stories that violate the

[126] Ibid., p. 106.
[127] Ibid.

Victorian norms of family relationships and […] moral justice.'[128] Crucially, for both writers this experience is 'registered' and revealed subtly through the representation of life in ordinary terms. Indeed, in Oliphant's novel *Hester*, Hester's experience of transitioning from a child into a young woman, and the growing discomfort she feels with the world around her, emerges slowly through life's ordinary happenings. One such example occurs when Hester is taking a walk with Captain Morgan and is listening to stories from his past:

> […] old Mrs Morgan looked out after them from the window and saw the tall slim girl walking by the side of the stooping old man […] And he told Hester stories of all the many-chaptered past, of the long historic distances, which he could remember like yesterday, and which seemed endless, like an eternity, to her wondering eyes […] But it was not these warlike recollections so much as the scraps of his more peaceful experience which entranced the young listener. […] A whole world seemed to open round Hester as he talked – a world more serious, more large, than this, in which there were only the paltry events of the day and her foolish little troubles. […] She used to listen breathless, wondering at the difference – for what danger was there, what chance of mortal peril or temptation, here?[129]

At the age of nineteen, Hester has taken her first tentative and uncertain steps into the adult world. Significantly, her questioning of her place within this new world occurs during the familiarity of a walk with her elderly friend, Captain Morgan. The comfort and excitement of the stories from his 'many-chaptered past' (p. 78) give Hester the opportunity to think about her own role within the environment of the Vernonry (the community established by the wealthy Catherine Vernon for her extended family) and eventually, beyond it. The safe and everyday act of walking with Captain Morgan enables Hester to remain 'entranced' (p. 78) by his swashbuckling tales, while at the same time allowing 'a whole world' (p. 78) to emerge gradually to the young woman. A new mode of thinking and possibility opens up to Hester which makes her question

[128] Ibid. p. 235.
[129] Margaret Oliphant, *Hester* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2009), pp. 78-79. All further references will be made in the body of the text.

her own 'foolish little troubles' (p. 78). Hester's walks with Captain Morgan enable her to maintain her childlike curiosity while simultaneously 'wondering at the difference' (p.78) of what exists beyond both the safety of the Vernonry, and also the bounds of her childhood. Walking with the Captain gives Hester time to make gradually the transition from child to adult. It also encourages her to think about a life different to the one she has. The simple act of walking with an old friend is crucial, because it enables Hester's thoughts on her newly-discovered adulthood to appear to her gradually, while under the supervision of somebody older, familiar, and more experienced.

In *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell also considers a young woman's transition into adulthood. Just as it did for Hester, Molly Kirkpatrick's move from being a child to a young woman emerges slowly, through ordinary, domestic experience. In an extract from the novel, Molly is in conversation with her father, Mr Gibson:

> Mr Gibson sat down in the arm-chair made ready for him, and warmed his hands at the fire, seeming neither to need food nor talk, as he went over a train of recollections. Then he roused himself briskly from his sadness, and looking round the room, he said briskly enough, -
>
> 'And where's the new mamma?'
>
> 'She was tired, and went to bed early. Oh, papa! must I call her "mamma"?'
>
> 'I should like it,' replied he, with a slight contraction of the brows. […]
>
> 'Why shouldn't you call her "mamma"? I'm sure she means to do the duty of a mother to you. We all may make mistakes, and her ways may not be quite all at once our ways; but at any rate let us start with a family bond between us.'
>
> What would Roger say was right? – that was the question that rose to Molly's mind. […] She kept silence, though she knew her father was expecting an answer. […]
>
> All at once she said, -
>
> 'Papa, I will call her "mamma"!'[130]

[130] Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters,* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), pp. 174-175. All further references will be made in the body of the text.

Like Hester, Molly is trying to find her way in an adult world. The conversation with her father lays bare her feelings towards her new stepmother, yet it also demonstrates her love for her father and her eagerness to please him. The starkness of the simple conversation means Molly must face her growing maturity, and the responsibility which maturity brings. Like Hester, Molly holds on to some of her childish traits, protesting against having to call her new stepmother 'mamma' (p. 174). It is her love for her father, and the gradual realisation that she is no longer a child, which forces Molly to reconsider her position. Along with her feelings towards her father, Molly holds her friend, Roger Hamley, in high esteem and she wonders, 'What would Roger say was right?' (p. 174). Like Hester, as the move into the adult world gradually takes place, Molly requires the advice and the stability of those with more experience to help guide her decisions. Though the conversation with her father is simple, this simplicity is crucial because it reveals Molly's emerging transition into (and understanding of) the adult world.

Such dedication to domesticity and day-to-day life is discussed by both Gaskell and Oliphant in their factual (and indeed, personal) writing as much as in their fiction. I would now like to turn to some examples from both authors which demonstrate how important their commitment to their domestic lives was in their own lives as much as in their writing. There is one section especially in Oliphant's *Autobiography* which is, to borrow Levine's term, typically 'Oliphantian' in its unsentimentality, yet is simultaneously loaded with feeling and meaning:[131]

> […] it is exactly those family details that are interesting, - the human story with all its chapters. I have often said, however, that none of us with any strong sense of family credit which used to be so general, but is not so, I think, now, could ever really tell what were perhaps the best and most creditable things in our own life, since by the strange fate which attends us human creatures, what is most creditable to one is often least creditable to another. These things steal

[131] Ibid.

> out; they are divined in most cases, and then forgotten. Therefore, all can never be told of any family story, except at the cost of family honour, and that pride which is the most pardonable of all pride, the determination to keep unsullied a family name.[132]

In this section of the *Autobiography,* Oliphant is reflecting on the day she took charge of her nephew Frank, when her brother (also named Frank) was financially ruined. Her reflections on her own 'human story' are touching and personal yet appear also to show Oliphant discussing life in fateful terms, with the suggestion that difficulty and pride are incidental happenings which could befall anybody at any time. This passage, I feel, offers an insight into Oliphant's thoughts about how the difficult and even controversial times in life are to be expected. In a stark tone of acceptance in which she appears to suggest that whether or not an action is 'creditable' should not (and cannot) be judged by a 'human creature' who is itself subject to fallibility. Her suggestion that the apparently shameful, or at the very least undesirable, periods in our lives are merely passing episodes demonstrates, I would argue, her grounding in the ordinary which she reflects in her writing. It represents what Levine discusses as her 'confronting [of] serious moral failures' while also acknowledging that these 'failures' are a part of life.[133]

In this passage, Oliphant is both deeply personal and typically distant at the same time, mirroring through a reflection of her own life her ability to communicate deep thoughts, while never officially stating her view. Although she speaks about her own family, Oliphant could well be speaking about any family and this is, I would argue, purposeful, enabling Oliphant the wife, mother, sister, and aunt to remain as detached in her opinions as Oliphant the author. The section reveals Oliphant's

[132] Oliphant, *The Autobiography*, p. 177.
[133] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 235.

connection to her family and reflects the importance she places upon it. It was written while she considered which parts of her life her readers would be most interested in reading about after her death, and it is interesting that she concludes that it is the 'family details' which offer the greatest insight; those ordinary details that make up an entire life story, encompassing all of its events, big and small.[134] It is clear that Oliphant, like Gaskell, places a great importance on her family life and on the grounding it provides. Her acknowledgment that her family, as many other families, cannot tell 'all' of its history if it is to keep its name 'unsullied' is another quiet acknowledgment of the human ability to err and to make mistakes which must be accepted as a part of ordinary life, and which exists whether or not we choose to accept it. It suggests that Oliphant understood societal pressures and how judgements were made on 'unfavourable' actions, but she is also pragmatic in her understanding of the inevitability of such 'unfavourable' aspects of life.

Like Gaskell who, as Billington notes, did not 'feel bound to step in to distinguish what [was] to be judged from what [was] to be extenuated in a person', Oliphant moves away from what Levine terms 'persistent moral pressure and analysis' within her writing and indeed within her private life.[135] In this section of her *Autobiography*, Oliphant does not condemn her own family by making moral judgements; nor does she condemn others. Instead, she demonstrates an acceptance that we must try to understand and be reconciled to the fact that unfortunate events happen. She suggests that we must allow that life's episodes, however devastating, will take place, accepting them as a part of ordinary human existence. In his discussion of Oliphant's commitment to ordinary experiences, and her acute ability to portray it

[134] Oliphant, *The Autobiography*, p. 177.
[135] Billington, *Faithful Realism*, p. 33; Levine., 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 233.

in her work, Levine provides a quotation from her novel *A Country Gentleman and his Family,* which I feel sums up her acceptance:

> When we get over all this, - that is, the shock, and the change, and the awe of the going away, - what will it be then, to all of us? We shall just settle down once more into our ordinary life, as if nothing had happened. That is what will come of it. That is what always comes of it. There is nothing but the common routine, which goes on and on forever.[136]

Though the quotation is from Oliphant's fiction, it is characteristic of the same level-headed philosophy which the passage from her *Autobiography* provides. In both works she accepts the 'routine' of life to which all things will return, and with this comes an acceptance of the difficulties and hardships. She realises that, eventually, all things are forgotten and people move on. Both passages provide examples of that embracing of the ordinary which Oliphant weaves through all of her writing. This way of thinking is equally as relevant to Gaskell as it is to Oliphant because both authors represent ordinary domesticity as a crucially important tool in women's lives, providing them with the necessary space and skills to thrive and develop their identities, regardless of their life circumstances. It is this acceptance which reiterates Oliphant's ambiguous space between the Victorian writers and the modernists as discussed by Levine. He notes that much of her writing (especially her late nineteenth-century writing) belongs in the realms of modernism rather than with 'the great mid-century writers.'[137] Instead of focussing on the sensational elements of life's instances, as many of the mid-Victorians did (including, at times, Gaskell), Oliphant is more concerned with dealing with experience in its starkest terms, and without sentiment. Indeed, it cannot be denied that Oliphant's writing in the closing decades of the nineteenth century places her much closer chronologically and in essence to the modernists than Gaskell, who

[136] Margaret Oliphant, *A Country Gentleman and his Family*, (Teddington: Echo Library, 2010), p. 38. Quoted in Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 234.
[137] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 236.

wrote predominantly in the middle of the century. Nonetheless, her position is particularly nuanced and complicated. It is a position which means Oliphant creates female characters who exist within the complex spaces between realism, modernism, and the emergence of naturalism at the end of the century. Though Oliphant's female characters are affected by their upbringing and surroundings, their decisions and actions take them beyond these initial boundaries and enable them to affect and shape their own lives.

In her 2016 book *Working Girls,* Katherine Mullin is one of the few critics, along with Levine, to look beyond the 'anti-feminist' label which has dogged her reputation to discuss Oliphant's role as a radical author, considering particularly how she subtly situates herself in a subversive position which enters into modernist territory. Indeed, Mullin discusses Oliphant's role as an author who frequently 'took up […] protagonist[s] associated with the experimental, sexually equivocal, literary naturalism she elsewhere denounced.'[138] In other words, in her reviews for the conservative Blackwood she condemned those novels which were actually influencing her own practices as a novelist. In a study of Oliphant's novel, *The Cuckoo in the Nest* (1892), Mullin looks to the story's main protagonist, the barmaid Patty Hewitt, as 'an emerging example of assertive femininity'.[139] Mullin considers Oliphant's 'often contradictory attitudes to late-Victorian feminism' which saw her producing female characters who are radically 'experimental' and even 'sexually equivocal'.[140] Importantly, Mullin explores Oliphant's representation of women who, like *The Cuckoo in the Nest*'s Patty Hewitt, adopt enterprising strategies to survive and flourish beyond the domestic sphere.

[138] Mullin, *Working Girls,* p. 211.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid.

Women such as Patty have adopted working roles (Patty is a barmaid) which place them in the public space, where Oliphant endows them with the agency to be in control of their own minds, sensibilities, and even (as Gaskell does, radically, with many of her female characters) sexuality. Not only is Patty self-aware, she is also 'emotionally disengaged' regarding her marriage, and therefore in a position of power which 'underlines her explosion of traditional gender roles'.[141] Patty's role as a self-sufficient barmaid means she is automatically endowed with a sense of independence, assertiveness, and even autonomy. Her job means she has access to many areas of society beyond most women's experience, and importantly she has a considerable amount of contact with a variety of men. In the early pages of the story, Oliphant makes clear that Patty is not a passive woman. The young woman has 'an air of knowing her own mind, and fully intending to carry out all its purposes'.[142] Physically, she is 'not a beautiful girl' (p. 9); her 'features […] [are] not very good, and there was a hardness in the lines, which, no doubt, would strengthen in later years' (p. 10). From the outset, Oliphant creates a female character whose mental determination and physical appearance suggest she is the opposite of the beautiful, naïve, and innocent girl at risk of seduction, or the young woman who has led a cloistered existence and is waiting patiently for a husband. Instead, Patty's self-awareness means she is experienced and is aware of what is needed to survive and even conduct herself out in the public space. Oliphant's radicalism is demonstrated through Patty, who 'explo[des] […] gender roles' with her enterprising nature.[143] Her 'barroom talents' and her learned ability to manage and manipulate men, particularly her admirer

[141] Ibid.
[142] Margaret Oliphant, *The Cuckoo in the Nest* (Hutchinson & Co.: London, 1892), p. 10. Viewed on https://archive.org/stream/Cuckoo_in_the_Nest_vol1#page/n11/mode/2up [accessed 8th October 2016] All further references will be made in the body of the text.
[143] Mullin, *Working Girls*, p. 211.

Gervase, means Patty subverts typical gender expectations to place herself in a position of power.[144] Although she uses her sexuality to good effect, particularly in her clever pursuit of Gervase, she does not do so primarily for sexual purposes. Instead, Patty's practicality and common sense mean she is aware of what she needs to do to elevate her position in life and to survive.

Oliphant elevates Patty above moral judgement. She is a young woman well-versed in self-preservation, who simply does what is necessary to manage her life on a day-to-day basis in a patriarchal society. Through Patty, Oliphant reaffirms her commitment to representing the opportunities available for women to embody identities out in the public sphere. Oliphant's reputation 'as a writer epitomizing a "wholesome", "harmonious", "old-fashioned" school' permits her to create radical characters such as Patty without seeming to voice openly her opinions or state her position.[145] Oliphant's façade enables her, again, to work behind a mask of respectability and reiterates the importance she places on the 'inner matters of fact'.[146] Her reputation thus becomes her mask, not in a hypocritical sense, but as a pragmatic strategy adopted by Victorian women to speak her mind in a society which affords few opportunities for this. By maintaining a respectable reputation, seemingly positioned within typically Victorian conventions and values, she is thus able to write about unconventional themes in radical ways. Levine notes that 'Oliphant confronts Victorian realism as itself conventional […] [providing within her own work] a fuller, less sentimental engagement with the hard unaccommodating actual'.[147] As a result, he continues, her writing 'marks a formal change in the novel that required the yet

[144] Ibid., p. 210.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Billington, *Faithful Realism*, p. 64.
[147] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 235.

greater swerve of an ironic modernism to make apparent'.[148] This 'swerve' represents a mode of thinking which retains some Victorian conventions, while moving simultaneously beyond them and into the space occupied by modernist modes. By inhabiting both worlds, yet belonging fully to neither, Oliphant's writing exists in the transitional gap between the Victorian and the modern. Her dedication to depicting 'common routine' thrives in this space, because it enables her to create female characters like Patty, who do not fit within the typical gender conventions of nineteenth-century society, yet are not wholly modern, either. Instead, Oliphant is interested in situations (and people) where 'the action of the mind is more important than the story'.[149] She represents the importance of daily, ordinary life through her characters, with a version of realism which focusses on how quotidian existence within a male-dominated society is managed and coped with. It is out of this daily life that Oliphant's stories emerge and it is through her dedication to the importance of the 'common routine' of life that she demonstrates what her writing represents: that ordinary, common life involves the 'necessary commitment to keep things running, whatever the constraints and disappointments'.[150] Her space between Victorian sentiment and the emergence of modernism at the end of the nineteenth century is crucial to this because it enables her to represent the changing conventions of women's lives without breaking the boundaries which surrounded notions of decency. Her writing is concerned with a perpetual flow of ordinary experience which embodies life and all its possibilities and happenings.

Unlike Oliphant, Gaskell's position as a writer in the middle of the nineteenth century roots her much more firmly within Victorian sentiment and even sensational

[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid., p. 236.
[150] Ibid., p. 238.

expression. Nonetheless, this does not detract from her ability to think in radical ways and to believe in the importance of showing that female sexuality is a part of ordinary life. Where Oliphant almost retracts from over-description, allowing events to play out and take their natural shape, Billington argues that 'the marvel of Gaskell's realism is that she recognizes how obdurately difficult life is, and yet simply dissolves back into it'.[151] In other words, while Oliphant often remains at a distance, Gaskell's Victorian sentiment sees her become wholly absorbed in describing an experience fully, even if such a description requires a move towards emotion and sensation. Despite their different approaches to the exploration and representation of radical ideas within their writing, both Gaskell and Oliphant are equally successful at grounding their thoughts and experiences in the importance of, and indeed the celebration of, the power of the domestic space for women.

Gaskell's commitment to her domestic family life is, as I suggested earlier, made clear through her private correspondence, much of which is written to friends and family, especially her daughter, Marianne. Many of her letters show Gaskell as a wife, mother, and friend, and demonstrate a woman who was as at ease running her home and looking after her family as she was as a successful author. As my earlier example of her letter to the young mother and aspiring author showed, Gaskell's personal correspondence is largely dedicated to her life as an 'ordinary' woman whose private family life was of the highest importance. Because the letters were intended for her family and friends, Gaskell often speaks freely and openly. Her dedication to maintaining an identity within the bounds of conventional middle-class society is clear through her correspondence, much of which deals with day-to-day life. Though there are many examples to choose from, I have selected a letter from 1861 in which Gaskell

[151] Billington, *Faithful Realism*, p. 106.

wrote to her daughters, Marianne and Meta. In the letter, Gaskell discusses how busy she has been, shopping and taking care of guests. The example, I feel, provides another fascinating insight into her domestic life and 'ordinary' identity as a mother:

> My dearest children, I was so glad to hear from you, though my pen does not look very like it. Julia & I walked home; going to the Cathedral service […] then pricing a double set of chamber-ware, 3£ the cheapest – then to look at black shawls for you, MA & Meta, at Moore and Butterworth's – silk barège *scarf* shawls, 35s – grenadine *shawls* ditto […] came home, found Elliott crying and faint, & had a horrid bustle to get tea ready for Mrs Shuttleworth and Fanny Lamport; but we were ready at last, with eggs filled with anchovy, à la Mrs Shadwell.[152]

Uglow notes that Gaskell's letters to her family 'give an intimate view of the Gaskells' domestic and social life [and are] the kind of letters Elizabeth liked to get herself'.[153] Certainly, this example is written in an informal and typically busy tone, yet it also demonstrates how seriously Gaskell took her relationship with her family, and her role as a mother and a wife in the domestic space. Significantly, her letter to her daughters shows Gaskell when she does not have to act in a professional manner. Instead, it is filled with news about how she has been shopping for scarves for them and rushing to 'get tea ready' for visitors when the cook is taken ill. Gaskell the mother is no less detailed when writing about her daily events than when she is writing one of her novels, exemplifying how she embraced her role as a mother and host as a creative one which lends itself to writing. While Oliphant's autobiographical writing is much more formal in tone (because she knew it would be read by strangers), Gaskell's letters are informal and chatty and demonstrate a woman whose commitment to her family meant that she took selecting clothing for her daughters as seriously as her writing. Though it could be argued that Gaskell's letters to her family offer nothing more than

[152] Gaskell, *Letters*, Marianne and Margaret Gaskell, 23rd May 1861, pp. 652-654.
[153] Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, p. 268.

a fascinating insight into her daily life, I would maintain that they are much more important than that. Her concern with and connection to the details of her daily life (and indeed, the relaying of it to her daughters) which is demonstrated in her personal correspondence, again reiterates what Billington terms as her 'attending to the slight and seemingly incidental, while always recognising that the apparent unimportance of these things is inseparably connected to how important they are.'[154] Gaskell's core belief in the power of the ordinary finds its grounding in her daily family life and this is, I would argue, the same belief which flows through her writing. One effect of this belief is that she infuses her novels and short stories with the power of ordinary experience, allowing Gaskell to demonstrate that female sexuality is a part of this everyday discussion. These things are important because ordinary life is very important to her.

These examples from the life-writing of both Gaskell and Oliphant show two women who master the space between what Levine terms as convention and unconventionality.[155] Both writers are Victorian wives and mothers, with identities within the domestic space, yet they are also successful career-women who have an existence out in the public arena. I would argue that the connection between their personal writing and their fiction and the dedication to representing domesticity as crucially important are at the core of the success of both writers. They prove, not only through their fiction, but also through the way they live their lives, that young women could be wives and mothers, yet if they chose they could also have professional interests. I would argue that what both Gaskell and Oliphant demonstrate is that women could be apparently 'unconventional' while also simultaneously living entirely

[154] Billington, *Faithful Realism,* p. 49.
[155] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 233.

conventional lives, being a wife and looking after a family. Importantly, both their lives and their writing demonstrate that women could (and should) be socially capable, thinking for themselves and managing their own lives. This, they demonstrated, could be achieved with a 'room of one's own' (or even a room shared with a friend or family member) in an extended version of domesticity, a space where women could find opportunities for personal fulfilment, education and the forging of their own identities.

Chapter Two

Elizabeth Gaskell: Rewriting Fallenness

> Three or four *men* have written to approve, - some – one or two at least high in literature, - and two with testimony as valuable as fathers of families, - grave thoughtful practical men. I think I have put the small edge of the wedge in, if only I have made people talk & [sic] discuss the subject a little more than they did.[156]

These words were written by Elizabeth Gaskell in response to Anna Jameson, who had written to the author in praise of her second novel *Ruth*. With its controversial subject matter depicting a young seamstress, seduced, made pregnant and abandoned, the book's publication in 1853 had been met with less than favourable reviews. Banned in many households, and in Gaskell's own words, 'not a book for young people, unless read with someone older', in *Ruth* she had again dared to venture into the world of the 'fallen woman.'[157] Many of Gaskell's contemporaries felt that she had chosen a hazardous and inflammatory subject. Despite such opposition, Gaskell was not afraid of confronting what others considered to be one of the most dangerous social evils. Five years earlier, she had published *Mary Barton*. One of the novel's key characters, Esther, has all the hallmarks of the 'fallen woman', a prostitute who had previously been seduced by an officer, made pregnant, and later forced to turn to a life on the streets. In Esther, Gaskell did not shy away from controversy. Through such characters as Esther, Ruth, and Lizzie (in her short-story 'Lizzie Leigh'), Gaskell demonstrated her discomfort regarding the unfair treatment of apparently 'fallen

[156] Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Letters of Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. J.A.V Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966) Letter 153 to Anna Jameson, March 7th, 1853, p. 226.
[157] Gaskell, *The Letters of Elizabeth Gaskell*, Letter 148 to Anne Robson, Before 27th January, 1853, p. 220.

women' and proved that she was determined to 'put the small edge of the wedge in' in a bid to highlight what she felt about their increasingly desperate plight. Gaskell believed these women had individual stories to tell, and she was not prepared to ignore those whom others were dismissing as depraved and dangerous. Importantly, through both Esther and Ruth, Gaskell began the important work (work which was equally important to Oliphant) of educating her young female readers about differing versions of sexuality and how sex should be considered as a natural part of women's lives. Both female characters enabled Gaskell to start 'the vital beginning of thinking' in her readers.[158] In other words she encouraged them to consider, understand, and empathise with the situations of the diverse range of characters they were reading about. As well as working as a writer, Gaskell was also a keen philanthropist who engaged in social work in the community of Manchester. As Unitarians, she and her husband William chose to trust in, as Jenny Uglow suggests, 'the innate goodness of human nature'. As a result, it was 'against social evil, not original sin or the works of the devil, that the Gaskells took their stand.'[159] This progressive and charitable way of thinking meant that Gaskell refused to castigate those women who had 'fallen' from grace, choosing instead to look at the reasons behind each individual situation. She encouraged her readers to do the same by presenting young women in her novels whose situations were complex and she offered opportunities for consideration and thought rather than harsh judgment.

Gaskell had direct experience of women who were labelled 'fallen'. In 1850, three years before the publication of *Ruth*, she wrote to Charles Dickens asking for help for a sixteen year-old girl named Pasley. The girl had lost her job as a dressmaker

[158] Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?*, p. 11.
[159] Uglow, *A Habit of Stories*, pp. 72-73.

when the business she worked for collapsed, and she was left in the hands of a 'profligate' woman who 'connived at the girl's seduction by a surgeon in the neighbourhood.'[160] Eventually, Pasley found herself in the grip of alcoholism and started to steal to fund her addiction. On her entry to prison, she fell ill, only to discover that the prison surgeon was in fact her seducer. So harrowing did she find the girl's situation, Gaskell hoped that Dickens, along with the wealthy philanthropist Angela Burdett Coutts, would help with Pasley's passage to Australia where she could begin a new life. Much to Gaskell's delight, her call for help was answered, and a 'respectable family' was found to take Pasley on her voyage.[161] Far from viewing girls like Pasley as innately bad, Gaskell chose to look to their upbringing, their surroundings and their social situations as an explanation for their plight. Equally, she was reticent to apportion total blame for a sexual 'fall' on the woman involved. As Deborah Anna Logan points out, 'Gaskell condemns both the social hypocrisy that vaguely displaces women's comprehension of sexual decorum onto some "natural" female intuition and the idea that fallen sexuality is a wilful and deliberate moral lapse devoid of male responsibility.'[162] This social inability to recognise male culpability, preferring to blame the 'wilful', unvirtuous 'Eve' who is 'longing to reign' over and degrade her male counterpart with her sexual appetites, is an attitude shared by a number of nineteenth-century commentators on prostitution, and is one which, I will demonstrate, Gaskell fought against through both her fiction and her social work.[163] As Meghan Burke Hattaway suggests, 'Gaskell's rhetorical rehabilitation of fallen

[160] Gaskell, *The Letters of Elizabeth Gaskell*, Letter 61 to Charles Dickens, January 8th 1850, pp. 98-100.
[161] For the complete letters referring to Pasley, see *The Letters of Elizabeth Gaskell* Letters 61-63, pp. 98-100
[162]Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing,* p. 47.
[163] Nina Auerbach, 'The Rise of the Fallen Woman', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 35.1 (1980) pp. 29-52, p. 29.

women in her prose echoes aspects of her real-life involvement in the "magdalenist" reform movement of the mid-1800s.'[164] This movement provided 'fallen' women with the opportunity to 'rehabilitate' themselves by removing them from 'dangerous' environments and giving them shelter in 'respectable' homes (such as Dickens's and Burdett Coutts's 'Urania Cottage') where they could work towards building a new life.[165] Like Hattaway, I see Gaskell's writing as providing her with an opportunity to demonstrate that women such as Esther and Ruth could be rehabilitated; that in fact, by creating a narrative that reveals a woman suffering as a result of a man 'seducing' her, Gaskell was suggesting that 'fallenness' was 'largely a social construction, unfairly assigned by discourse, rather than individual actions.'[166] I want to emphasise how Gaskell envisages this rehabilitation. Throughout her writing career, Gaskell demonstrates the important role which the ordinary and the domestic plays in the rehabilitation of 'fallen' women and the ways in which spending time within a domestic environment can offer time for reflection, restoration, education, and an all-important rehabilitation. Indeed, Gaskell's (and Oliphant's) novels show how the domestic space should be extended beyond the boundaries of 'respectable' ideals of marriage and maternity to include unmarried yet sexually-experienced women like Esther and Ruth, and how this extension of the domestic is crucial to their rehabilitation.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, prostitution was firmly embedded in social discourse as a supposedly dangerous social problem. In 1850, William Rathbone Greg published his famous article, 'Prostitution'. In this essay,

[164] Hattaway, "Such A Strong Wish For Wings", pp. 671-690, p. 673.
[165] For further information about Dickens's Urania Cottage and its role in the rehabilitation of 'fallen' women, see: Jenny Hartley, *Charles Dickens and the House of Fallen Women* (London: Methuen, 2008).
[166] Hattaway, "Such a Strong Wish for Wings", p. 677.

Greg explored the reasons why women turned to prostitution, choosing not to castigate them as 'pariahs and lepers' but instead focusing on their mistreatment and the problems of reintegration they faced once they had 'fallen'.[167] Like Gaskell, Greg believed that 'fallen' women could be redeemed but that they were prevented by 'harsh, savage, unjust, unchristian public opinion.'[168] Greg believed that the balance of culpability was unfairly weighted towards women and that punishment should be equally meted out to the 'betrayer', who was instead offered 'the mercy, the gentleness, the kind consideration towards human infirmity.'[169] Like Gaskell, Greg questioned how and why men escaped the severe judgments and castigation that were handed down to 'fallen' women, suggesting that a 'fairer reckoning' was deserved by both the seducer and the seduced.[170] Seven years after Greg's seminal work, venereologist William Acton wrote a book on prostitution which, as Nina Atwood argues, was the first to offer 'a dialogic window on the interplay between public debate, legislation and medical opinion.'[171] In his study, Acton attempted to assimilate existing theories on the state of prostitution, tying together studies that included public opinion, legal matters and official medical reports appertaining to the mid-nineteenth-century prostitute. For Acton, as Atwood argues, 'prostitution was a "picture" with "many sides". Prostitutes could be "fair creatures" elbowing "wives and daughters in the parks"; "painted, dressy women […] flaunting along the streets"; or "miserable creatures, ill-fed […] uncared for."'[172] This multi-faceted image of the prostitute is

[167] W.R. Greg, 'Prostitution', *Westminster Review*, Vol. 53 (1850): in *Prostitution in the Victorian Age: Debates On The Issue From 19th Century Critical Journals,* ed. Keith Neild (Hants: Gregg International Publishers, 1973) pp. 448-506, p. 450.
[168] Ibid. p. 471.
[169] Ibid. p. 474.
[170] Ibid.
[171] Nina Attwood, *The Prostitute's Body* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), p. 19.
[172] W.Acton, *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social,& Sanitary Aspects, In London and Other Large Cities. With Proposals for the Mitigation and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils* (London: John Churchill, 1857), quoted in Atwood, *The Prostitute's Body,* p. 28.

one which Gaskell would recognise, both in her writing and from her social work on the streets of Manchester. Certainly, the idea that the prostitute could appear as either a 'fair' and supposedly well-dressed 'creature', or as a 'miserable' and 'uncared for' figure was one which Gaskell was interested in investigating and demonstrating different aspects of 'fallenness' through her literary work. Indeed, she looked to expose the near impossibility of defining exactly what made a woman turn to prostitution and how appearance and dress worked when it came to a woman bearing what Judith Walkowitz calls 'the burden of proving she was virtuous.'[173]

The field of scholarly work on Gaskell and her representations of sexually experienced unmarried women is a broad one. Deidre d'Albertis looks to Gaskell's 'streetwalker' as the 'detached observer of city life', viewing the world from the invisible position of the outcast.[174] For d'Albertis, the prostitute's existence is 'possible only on the streets', where she 'perversely reinvents feminine influence to encompass seduction, culpability and carnal influence […] beyond the domestic sphere'.[175] While Gaskell demonstrates that 'fallen women' such as Esther are forced to carve out their existence in a world considerably removed from the norms of domesticity, I will argue that Gaskell also represents these women as having the potential to exist within domestic life; indeed, she suggests that such an existence could be crucial to their social rehabilitation. Far from 'unequivocally' marking the prostitute as a 'sinner' as d'Albertis suggests, I will demonstrate how Gaskell considers the identity of women such as Esther as located between the domestic and the public spaces.[176] While a prostitute, Esther is on the streets, out in the public space

[173] Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 2.
[174] d'Albertis, *Dissembling Fictions*, p. 53.
[175] Ibid.
[176] d'Albertis, *Dissembling Fictions*, p. 51.

and therefore removed from the domestic, yet as Mary's aunt she has an indisputable link to the family life from which she has been ostracised. Gaskell's radicalism can be heard loudly in the suggestion that sexually experienced unmarried women like Esther have a right to a domestic identity and that this identity is crucial in offering them rehabilitation and recuperation. In her discussion of the sexual difference between Mary Barton's mother and her aunt Esther, Logan refers to Esther's place on what she terms as the 'sexual spectrum'.[177] According to Logan, this 'spectrum' consists of the prostitute (like Esther) at one extreme, and the woman involved in 'legitimate marriage and motherhood' at the other.[178] While Gaskell's novels and short stories do represent women from across the scale of sexual experience, they demonstrate clearly the importance of providing all women room within an extended version of the domestic space. Gaskell questions the idea of a woman's legitimacy being measured by conventional sexual double standards, suggesting that all women regardless of their sexual experience and marital status deserve room to grow and to forge their own identity within extended domesticity. Indeed, Oliphant's novels and short stories extend this idea further, demonstrating that women could enjoy identities in the public space and even a career of their own.

Indeed, then, while Logan is concerned with what she feels is the danger of the definition of the 'fallen woman' reaching 'beyond the woman who engages in non-legitimated or unmarried sex' to include 'any woman not manifesting the marriage-and-motherhood' domestic ideal, I will argue that this difficulty of definition is precisely what Gaskell attempts to demonstrate through her female characters.[179] The examples of women represented in her novels come from across the social scale, and

[177] Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing*, p. 87.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing*, p. 16.

their differing levels of sexual experience and knowledge exemplify that 'fallenness' is not a socially prescribed term used only in relation to women of the lower classes. Logan argues that women like Esther used 'transparent attempts to appear middle class' in order to demonstrate 'their sexual availability.'[180] While Gaskell does highlight the difficulties for women like Esther to escape from their 'prostitute' identity, I will argue that she represents clothing and appearance in her narratives as an important tool used by her female characters to demonstrate their sense of self and their different roles and identities. Indeed, for Gaskell (and indeed for Oliphant) understanding clothing is part of women's training in domesticity which assists them in moving beyond the domestic and entering the public space. Kirsteen Douglas, for example, in Oliphant's novel *Kirsteen,* not only understands clothing, she uses her skills in designing and making dresses to forge a public identity and a career which take her away from the confined domesticity of her father's home. Central for both Gaskell and Oliphant is the idea that the domestic should be a space for personal growth and development regardless of a woman's sexual experiences or status.

Mariana Valverde explores the connections between the 'fallen woman' and her 'love of finery', suggesting that 'the socioeconomic and moral status of the wearer' are inextricably linked.[181] She looks to what she terms Gaskell's 'hidden anxiety' regarding 'fallen women' and their ability to use clothing to 'masquerade' as the 'honest woman' they no longer are.[182] While Gaskell does demonstrate the ability of 'fallen women' and prostitutes to purchase 'finery' of their own, and indeed to replace it with so-called 'respectable' clothing if necessary, I will argue that through her novels, she emphasises that an enjoyment of fine clothing does not necessarily equal

[180] Ibid. p. 35.
[181] Mariana Valverde, 'The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse', *Victorian Studies* Vol. 32 (1989), pp. 169-188, p. 169.
[182] Ibid, p. 172.

depravity. Instead she shows that a working-class woman is not depraved because she admires, or aspires to own, fine clothing and that such a belief is a social construction based on class prejudices.

Nina Auerbach looks to the 'fallen woman's' reputation as 'a destitute and drowned prostitute or errant wife cast beyond the human community' in order to explain away the nineteenth-century fear surrounding the 'uneasy implications for wives who stayed at home.'[183] She focusses on what she terms the 'transforming power of the fall'; the irreversible loss of virtue and entry into a world of experience and sexual knowledge.[184] Instead of defining her female characters as irredeemably and negatively transformed by their experiences, I argue that Gaskell worked hard in both her narratives and her social work to reject the label of 'fallen' as an ultimate, Eve-like damnation, and instead attempted to do away with it. Again, this is precisely why educating their readers through their novels was so important to Gaskell and Oliphant. By providing examples of young female characters in differing social (and even sexual) situations, both authors could show that sexuality was a natural and acceptable part of most women's lives. While society deems sexually experienced unmarried women as 'lost', Gaskell insists they should have a place for recuperation, education and rest within the domestic sphere. Certainly, Gaskell and Oliphant prove throughout their novels that it was largely within the domestic space where women could find all-important room for reflection and rehabilitation. The growing recognition in the nineteenth century of the existence of female sexuality had, according to Auerbach, frightening and 'uneasy implications' for many Victorians.[185] If seemingly 'good' women could also be sexual beings, then the boundaries between

[183] Auerbach, 'The Rise of the Fallen Woman', p. 33.
[184] Ibid. p. 35.
[185] Auerbach, 'The Rise of the Fallen Woman', p. 33.

them and the prostitute become increasingly blurred and difficult to define. Radically, Gaskell's novels set out to show that such boundaries were unnecessary. She showed that female sexuality was natural whether or not a woman was involved in 'respectable' marriage and maternity or had experienced sex outside of marriage. It was society's rigid definitions which condemned some women to ostracism.

The idea that a 'fallen' woman could also be a wife and mother is pursued by Logan, who suggests that 'Gaskell's fictional prostitutes represent varying degrees of "fallenness" united by maternal ideology.'[186] While I agree that Gaskell is interested in demonstrating varying degrees of 'fallenness' through her narratives, I would argue that her interest goes beyond maternal qualities. Instead of suggesting that motherhood is the solution to preventing 'fallen' women from taking part in further sexual indiscretion, Gaskell explores what happens to women who have children, but still find it a 'challenge to remain good while avoiding withdrawal from the temptations of the world', as Kalikoff suggests.[187] Gaskell demonstrates this difficulty through characters such as Esther, whose child dies because she must make a return to the streets in order to survive. Gaskell looks at what exists beyond the moral implications of 'falling' by exploring the reality of life for women with very little money and a child to look after. She analyses how prostitution was used as a means to an end for women trapped in poverty; women who, as Logan suggests, 'rarely returned to the factory (or domestic service or seamstressing) after the sexual "falls" that left them with another mouth to feed.'[188] With jobs offering wages which were often impossible to live on, such women turned to prostitution as a way of simply existing. Gaskell's Esther is an example of a woman whose entry into the world of prostitution is a

[186] Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing*, p. 71.
[187] Beth Kalikoff,'The Falling Woman in Three Victorian Novels', *Studies in the Novel,* Vol. 19.3, (1987), pp. 357-367, p. 358.
[188] Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing*, p. 67.

mixture of many causes and events, including that of poverty as a result of the uncertainties of factory work. Indeed, fluctuating trade meant that factory pay altered. While sometimes remuneration was good, at other times it was not sufficient and led to financial difficulties and hardship for workers. Though Esther embodies some of the stereotypical nineteenth-century 'fallen' woman attributes (she ran away with a man who told her he was an officer in the army, had a child outside of marriage, and turned to alcoholism and eventually prostitution as a means of survival), she cannot simply be explained as an emblematic prostitute. In the next section, I will explore how Gaskell uses the complicated character of Esther to emphasise the blurred lines between 'goodness' and the 'fallen' woman and how the stereotypical view of the nineteenth-century prostitute was, in reality, extremely limited; she was a figure almost impossible to define.

This idea is considered further by Josie Billington, when she recognises that for Gaskell, 'there is not and cannot be one right self'.[189] Indeed, Gaskell works repeatedly in her novels to demonstrate to her readers that there is not and cannot be one 'right', or in other words 'proper', side to an individual. Instead, a woman like Esther can inhabit an identity within the domestic space while simultaneously being a sexually experienced unmarried woman. Gaskell shows that women, indeed all human beings, do not simply conform to one already formed and unchanging identity (in Esther's case, the 'fallen' prostitute) but rather a much more complex amalgamation of overlapping identities. In *Is Literature Healthy?* Billington discusses this idea through what she terms as 'the stereotyping single story.'[190] In her discussion, she refers to the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie who, when young, always

[189] Billington, *Faithful Realism*, p. 88.
[190] Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?*, p. 71.

considered her financially successful family's house-boy to be simply a poor child. It was only after she had visited his home and his mother showed her a beautifully woven basket made by the boy's brother that she realised she had never considered his family capable of artistic talent. Her overarching judgment of them as poor people meant she could not equate them with anything else.[191] The issue, according to Adichie, with 'the stereotyping single story […] is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete' and the same conclusion can be drawn for representations of women like Esther.[192] Gaskell's radicalism means she works hard in her novels to remove generalising opinions such as the one that suggests a sexually experienced unmarried woman cannot also have an opportunity for recuperation within the domestic space. Esther is not just a prostitute in the same way that Adichie's house-boy was not simply a poor child. The work of the novelist is crucial in opening readers' eyes to 'the complex and overlapping realities that is the real form of experience.'[193] It is within their novels that both Gaskell and Oliphant implore their readers to take the time to look beyond a single and sometimes condemnatory identity such as 'the prostitute' and instead to understand all the layers that make up an individual. I would like to turn now to a closer analysis of Esther in order to show how Gaskell represents her as more than the archetypal prostitute.

[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Ibid.

On the streets

While Logan suggests that the unstable, often low wages gained from work in establishments such as mills and factories played no small part in working women turning to a life on the streets, Esther's brother-in-law John Barton blames small financial gains from such employment for turning women's heads, suggesting their limited monetary freedom enables them to 'maintain themselves any how' (p. 9), by which he means they do not focus exclusively on food and lodging, but spend money on clothes and entertainment. For Barton, Esther's downfall is a direct result of the factory work that allowed her to spend 'her money in dress' (p.9). In a particularly pertinent moment in the novel, Barton criticises Esther's love of clothing and dressing up, suggesting it can only lead to a life of prostitution:

> Says I, "Esther, I see what you'll end at with your artificials, and your fly-away veils, and stopping out when honest women are in their beds; you'll be a street-walker, Esther, and then, don't you go to think I'll have you darken my door, though my wife is your sister." So says she, "Don't trouble yourself, John, I'll pack up and be off now, for I'll never stay to hear myself called as you call me." (p.9)

Barton's scathing words to Esther draw attention to what Suzann Bick argues is Gaskell's way of expressing her own 'condemnation of financial independence for women'.[194] I would suggest that rather than Gaskell suggesting that women should not have their own incomes, she is instead using Barton to highlight the instant connection many Victorians made between women (particularly women of the working class) who owned attractive clothing and a sexual 'fall'. For Barton, these garments are

[194] Suzann Bick, '"Take Her Up Tenderly": Elizabeth Gaskell's Treatment of the Fallen Woman', *Essays in Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 18, (1989), pp.17-27, p. 19.

Esther's 'artificials' (p. 9) because they act as a costume that covers her status as a factory-worker and is dangerous because such clothes are attractive to any potential seducers. When she wears them, Esther displays herself in clothing which is widely viewed as inappropriate to her class and her position. As a result of daring to present herself in these so-called 'artificials' (p. 9), the presumption is made that she is not an 'honest woman'. Valverde suggests that an enjoyment of 'finery was in many ways seen as characteristic of the whole female sex: but the link between it and social fall is largely class-specific'.[195] Indeed, Barton has instantly made the connection between Esther's clothing and her fate as a 'street-walker' (p. 9). For him, Esther's attraction to fine clothing inevitably leads her to 'fall' because she is not of the class to whom he believes this type of dress 'naturally' belongs.

This link was frequently made in the nineteenth century when it came to deciding precisely what made a prostitute turn to her 'profession'. The Royal Commission's Report outlined what it deemed to be the main reasons for a woman ending up on the streets, with the Reverend Gregson, a Baptist Minister from Portsmouth, suggesting that 'the cases of girls going astray are chiefly two: Inducement to lead an idle life and dress extravagantly; and seduction by thoughtless young men, especially the officers'.[196] Greg also outlined that 'too many' women fell prey to 'the snares of vanity' and as a result found themselves on a downward spiral into prostitution.[197] For Logan working-class women like Esther, who seemingly attempted to mimic members of the middle class, 'paradoxically signalled their sexual availability'.[198] Indeed, Esther's class status means that her ability to wear fine

[195] Valverde, 'The Love of Finery', p. 170.
[196] 'Report of the Royal Commission upon the Administration and Operation of the Contagious Diseases Acts', *Sessional Papers: House of Commons*, XIX (1871), p. 60. Quoted in Attwood, *The Prostitute's Body*, p. 57.
[197] Greg, 'Prostitution', p. 458.
[198] Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing*, p. 35.

clothing will always be subject to scrutiny. However, when Esther dresses in clothing unusual to her class status, Gaskell does not suggest that she mimics the ladies of the middle class, or accentuates her sexuality. Instead, Gaskell outlines that judgement over women's clothing (and indeed, suggestions of class mimicry and lewd sexuality) are placed on women by a condemnatory society and have no direct relation to their goodness or indeed lack of it. According to Uglow, these judgements are the product of 'an illusory division': that between 'high' and 'low' culture'.[199] Certainly, Esther's 'profession' as a prostitute means that she wears a deteriorated type of 'high culture' clothing that middle-class ladies once wore, but in a very different way and for very different reasons. As a prostitute, Esther appears in the clothing that denotes her as such. Her lack of choice in the matter means vanity has been forced to give way to necessity. As Valverde points out, 'finery' in a 'pejorative sense meant clothes that were too showy, clothes that looked elegant and striking but were in some way unspecified cheap.'[200] Societal judgments based on class prejudice mean that Esther cannot wear 'finery' without it being viewed as 'cheap'. Her wearing of it will never be confused with the clothing of a 'true' lady because it no longer looks as it did when purchased by its first 'high-class' owner. Before it has reached Esther, it has probably passed through several hands and so by the time she receives it, it has become worn, dishevelled and degraded.

In an unfortunate meeting on the street after a Union meeting, John Barton recognises Esther wearing the 'artificials' (p. 9) he earlier prophesied would result in her fate as a 'street-walker'. Now, Esther's clothing has lost any of the beauty it once had and has instead been transformed into her 'faded finery' (p. 121). Seeing Esther's

[199] Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, p. 201.
[200] Valverde, 'The Love of Finery', p. 169.

degraded appearance, Barton's overriding emotion is loathing towards 'the dress' (p. 121). For him, Esther's fate is intrinsically linked with the inappropriate clothing she once longed for, and he automatically makes the connection between her appearance and her fate as a prostitute. Barton believes that Esther is 'of no doubtful profession' (p. 121) when she is wearing her dress, in other words, that there could be no doubt from seeing her that she is a prostitute. Her clothing has changed from that of a potential danger to Esther's 'respectable' reputation when it was new, to the direct sign of her sexual 'fall' demonstrated through its worn and tarnished appearance. As a result, for Barton, Esther is simultaneously and troublingly both Mary's aunt, and the 'fallen' woman who succumbs to the danger of falling prey to her own vanity, and whose love of clothing beyond her class status and means exacerbated her 'fall'. In Esther, Gaskell has created one of Acton's multi-faceted prostitutes. Her identity encompasses both the 'fair' young girl and the 'miserable' streetwalker.[201] Through this amalgamation, Gaskell reinforces the idea that however degraded Esther appears to be, her identity as Mary's aunt never changes. Therefore, Esther's place within the domestic space of Mary's home when she visits her to warn her of danger is a valid one, regardless of her prostitute identity. Despite Esther's sexual experience, Gaskell reinforces the suggestion that Esther, like all sexually experienced women, deserves a place within the domestic space. Indeed, for Gaskell, the tragedy of Esther is that she is not allowed to remain within the safe domestic space of Mary's home.

For Hattaway, a prescribed and 'disabling' identity such as that given to Esther was something Gaskell considered in her own life. As a woman with several facets to her own personality, including mother, wife and author, Gaskell was keen to

[201] W. Acton, *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social, & Sanitary Aspects* (1857), quoted in Atwood, *The Prostitute's Body*, p. 28.

avoid 'the disabling, persecutory effects of too-rigid definitions and ideals of propriety'.[202] Indeed, Gaskell's and Oliphant's radicalism has its roots in their roles as wives and mothers with domestic identities, who also enjoyed successful and lucrative writing careers in the public space. Both authors' concern with views about respectability and 'rigid definitions […] of propriety' was the basis for the representation within their novels of extended domesticity. This space included all women, including sexually-experienced unmarried women like Esther. Barton's judgement of Esther's identity as a prostitute is so rigid that he fears his daughter Mary's 'bodily likeness' to her 'seemed to suggest the possibility of a similar likeness in their fate' (p. 124). This idea of an infectious identity was taken up by Wilkie Collins later in the century in his 1873 novel, *The New Magdalen*. One of the novel's central 'fallen' characters, Mercy, speaks about how closely she resembled her dead mother and the trouble she faced as a result: 'I was left on the world, a nameless, penniless, outcast, with one fatal inheritance – God knows I can speak of it without vanity, after what I have gone through; - the inheritance of my mother's beauty.'[203] Collins's novel was published twenty-five years after *Mary Barton*, yet it expresses John Barton's fear of a 'fatal inheritance' from a 'fallen' relative, underlining his belief that a beautiful appearance coupled with vanity are enough to cause a woman to 'fall' and become a prostitute. Like Barton, Esther too believes her appearance has the power to infect Mary, but instead of an inherent infection, Esther believes it is the prostitute's clothing that has an ability to endanger the young girl and lead her astray.

Ahead of a late-night visit to her niece to warn her of some evidence which may implicate Jem Wilson in the murder of Harry Carson, Esther takes the decision

[202] Hattaway, "Such a Strong Wish for Wings", p. 685.
[203] Wilkie Collins, *The New Magdalen* (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1993), pp. 236-237. Quoted in Atwood, *The Prostitute's Body*, p. 114.

to change her 'finery' in favour of 'a suit of outer clothes befitting the wife of a working man' (p. 230). By exchanging the clothing of the 'prostitute' in favour of more 'appropriate garb' (p. 230), Esther suggests that the day-to-day clothing of her 'trade' is enough to influence Mary's opinion of her and does not represent her as an 'honest women' (p. 9). As a prostitute, Esther has been placed as exterior to what Hattaway labels 'the potential saving power of the family home', and so to return to it, albeit briefly, she feels she must adopt the appearance of a woman of that 'happy class' of working and domestic people.[204] Esther's 'fall' is complicated because, as Logan suggests, it was borne out of a longing for the 'period's middle-class romanticized fiction of love, marriage and motherhood, a standard inaccessible to her by virtue of her class.'[205] It is now essential that Esther wears working-class clothing because this is viewed as far worthier of respect than a tattered middle-class dress worn by many previous owners. Though she has been closed off from the 'Eden of innocence' (p. 230) of the Barton family home, Esther's honest 'fall' (honest because, as far as Esther is concerned, it was a 'fall' borne of love rather than for social advancement) and the good intentions she has in saving Mary, mean she deserves a place within in the recuperative and rehabilitative space of its domesticity. By adopting this 'sanctified' clothing, Esther's return to the home is, as Hattaway suggests, 'to protect rather than to contaminate.'[206]

Along with the addition of her working-class clothing, Esther's ability to protect her niece is heightened because of what Logan terms as her 'striking physical resemblance' to Mary's 'dead mother' (p. 225).[207] Despite Barton's fears for Mary because of her 'bodily likeness' (p. 124) to Esther, such a close resemblance to her

[204] Hattaway, "Such a Strong Wish for Wings", p. 675.
[205] Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing*, p. 86.
[206] Hattaway, "Such a Strong Wish for Wings", p. 675.
[207] Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing*, p. 87.

sister imbues her, however momentarily, with the level of respectability within the domestic space that her sister once held. So certain is she that it is her mother standing in front of her, 'Mary never doubted the identity' (p. 225) when she answered the door to her aunt. This intensely close resemblance between Mary, her mother and Esther suggests that in addition to his fears for Mary, Barton is also concerned that Esther's physical likeness could contaminate his wife's memory. Now, Esther has made real what Auerbach calls the 'possibilities of the outcast'.[208] Though she no longer exists as a fully functional member of the family, she has taken on a 'half-acknowledged' character; she is neither solely Esther, nor her sister, but an amalgamation of the two women.[209] Though Mary is convinced she sees her mother standing in front of her, leaving Esther 'unrecognised' (p. 225), Mary is in fact acknowledging the Esther-mother construct. Her close resemblance to her sister means Esther can try to offer Mary her protection within the domestic space of the Barton home. Though her life as a prostitute has left her an outcast, her position on the streets has enabled her to become what d'Albertis terms 'a detached observer of city life', able to 'go anywhere, to observe anything, as if she were invisible or immune to the restrictions ordinarily placed on her sex'.[210] Esther's 'wild night wanderings' (p. 154) enable her to discover the 'little piece of stiff writing-paper' (p. 227) that could implicate and condemn Jem Wilson in Harry Carson's murder. Her outcast status means she observes the happenings occurring around her without being noticed. Esther is the 'veiled figure' described by Uglow, who exists and does not exist.[211] Her 'disabling' prostitute identity becomes enabling at times like this because when she is assumed to be a prostitute, an 'individual of so little value or note to any' (p. 123), she has the ability

[208] Auerbach, 'The Rise of the Fallen Woman', p. 52.
[209] Ibid.
[210] d'Albertis, *Dissembling Fictions*, p. 53.
[211] Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, p. 207.

to save her niece from a similar fate and is able to do so without scrutiny.[212] It is the acknowledgment of her past actions and identity as a prostitute that, Logan suggests, removes Esther from the 'prostitute stereotype.'[213] According to Logan, Esther's difference is denoted by 'her breaking silence about the circumstances of her fall' and also because of 'her unconditional loyalty to and sacrifices for those she loves.'[214] Indeed, after John Barton's encounter with Esther on the street, he feels regret about his hasty words and actions, recalling to mind Esther's 'humility, her tacit acknowledgment of her lost character' (p. 123). Esther is not simply a prostitute; she is also a woman who is aware of her actions and their repercussions. While Barton believes her character to be 'lost', Esther's sense of regret and acknowledgment of her mistakes ensures she always maintains her integral decency.

Although Esther's life comes to a close near the end of the novel, her final return to Mary and the Barton household encompasses what Auerbach calls the 'transfiguration' of the 'fallen' woman.[215] After literally falling 'into what appeared simply a heap of white or light-coloured clothes' (p. 378) outside of the domestic space, Esther is finally returned to her rightful place within it. In a scene filled with religious imagery, Esther's final and literal 'fall' sees her 'artificials' (p. 9) and her 'finery' replaced with a covering of 'white' (p. 378). The 'once innocent Esther' (p. 378) no longer appears in the 'finery' that perpetually made apparent her prostitute status. Instead, she is covered in a garment which suggests purity, clarity and innocence. Esther's final and eternal covering, her gravestone, is marked with a Psalm: 'For he will not always chide, neither will he keep his anger for ever' (p. 378). For d'Albertis, 'Gaskell makes it perfectly clear that sexual notoriety can be dispelled only

[212] Hattaway, "Such a Strong Wish for Wings" p. 685.
[213] Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing*, p. 85.
[214] Ibid.
[215] Auerbach, 'The Rise of the Fallen Woman', p. 52.

through death or emigration.'[216] Yet this view fails to take into account that Esther is offered a partial redemption before she dies; a partial redemption that is proffered through the removal of the clothing that burdened her and marked her out as a 'fallen' woman. Her final visit to Mary shows Esther appearing in 'white or light-coloured clothes' (p. 378) which do not define her as degraded or 'fallen'. After her death, her burial in the same grave as John Barton, the man who prophesied that her love of 'finery' would see her become a 'street-walker' (p. 9), beneath a stone bearing the inscription of a Psalm, demonstrates a forgiveness for Esther, both in a spiritual and an earthly sense. As convention dictates that husbands and wives are usually buried together, being laid to rest in John Barton's grave sees Esther reunited in death with her sister, Mary. At the end of Esther's life, she is finally given a respectable 'home'.

Published two years after *Mary Barton*, Gaskell published her short story, 'Lizzie Leigh'. Like Esther, Lizzie turns to a life of prostitution after falling pregnant and being castigated from her home. As she did with Esther, Gaskell uses Lizzie as an opportunity to explore the castigation and treatment of the sexually experienced woman.

Innocence and Experience

Published in 1850 (three years before *Ruth*), 'Lizzie Leigh' tells the story of a seduced young girl, who after being made pregnant, turns to the workhouse and then to a life of prostitution. After finding her life on the streets impossible because she cannot look after a child, Lizzie gives her baby to a kind-hearted school-teacher, Susan Palmer, to

[216] d'Albertis, *Dissembling Fictions*, p. 79.

look after. When Lizzie's mother tries to find her lost daughter, suspecting she may be dead, she discovers Susan and realises that the child she has been protecting is Lizzie's. When the baby dies after an accident, Susan finds Lizzie and brings her to her home, where she is reunited with her mother. The story ends with Lizzie and her mother living together in a small cottage, helping the local sick and poor, and Lizzie 'pray[ing] always and ever for forgiveness'.[217] Like *Mary Barton*'s Esther, Lizzie experiences sexuality primarily through seduction and then through becoming a prostitute. Her first introduction to sex is harrowing when she is 'led astray [and her] master […] turn[s] her into the street as soon as he had heard of her condition' (p. 16). Lizzie's subsequent pregnancy and loss of position result in societal condemnation of her. Despite this, Gaskell is keen to show that Lizzie's sexual awareness and experience do not make her any less of a compassionate woman. In her discussion of the story, Uglow suggests that 'although Gaskell stresses forgiveness, her underlying attitude is ambivalent, as it always would be to sexual error'.[218] I would argue that Lizzie's eventual return to her mother, and her newly-found place in the community as a 'sad, gentle-looking woman […] [who] Many hearts bless' (p. 31) demonstrates that what Uglow deems as Gaskell's ambivalence is instead her quiet acknowledgment that Lizzie's sexual experience was a fact of life, rather than the actions of a wilfully bad and subversive woman. Lizzie's situation is the product of a difficult life, and her sexual experiences are intrinsically linked to this difficulty. Like Phillis Holman, from Gaskell's novella of 1863, *Cousin Phillis* (which I will discuss later in the chapter), Lizzie experiences suffering and the dawning of her sexuality, though in a very different way. Gaskell shows that there is no delineation to be drawn between the two

[217] Elizabeth Gaskell, 'Lizzie Leigh' in *Cousin Phillis and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2010), pp. 3-31, p. 31. All further references will be made in the body of the text.
[218] Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories,* p. 126.

women because though sexuality can be experienced in different ways, it is nevertheless a part of life.

Uglow draws attention to W.R. Greg's essay (also published in 1850), 'Prostitution', which discusses 'the contrast […] between society's attitude to the Prodigal Son and the 'Prodigal Daughter'', and the sexual double-standard.[219] Uglow suggests that Greg's essay highlights 'the sense of tremulous balance between redemption and ruin', a balance I would argue Gaskell demonstrates through Lizzie's character.[220] Like Phillis and Cynthia Kirkpatrick, Lizzie's appearance is important. Her acknowledgment of her sexuality, and her treatment as a result of it, has caused an alteration in the way she looks:

> This Lizzie was old before her time; her beauty was gone; deep lines of care, and alas! of want (or thus the mother imagined) were printed on the cheek, so round, and fair, and smooth, when last she gladdened her mother's eyes. Even in her sleep she bore the look of woe and despair which was the prevalent expression of her face by day; even in her sleep she had forgotten how to smile. (p. 27)

By suggesting that she is 'old before her time' (p. 27), Gaskell places Lizzie in the space between 'redemption and ruin'.[221] Her treatment as a 'fallen' woman because of her sexual experience has resulted in her physical ageing. In truth, she is still a young woman, who Gaskell suggests should not have been castigated because of her sexuality. Gaskell demonstrates the severe repercussions of an imposed and unnecessary sense of guilt as a result of a sexual encounter. The stark image she creates of a young woman who is filled with 'woe and despair' (p. 27) is one which condemns the persecutors rather than the women. Along with the loss of her youthful appearance, Lizzie's father also tries to deny her identity as his daughter, removing all of her

[219] Ibid., p. 321. For Greg's essay see W.R. Greg, 'Prostitution', *Westminster Review*, 53 (1850), pp. 448-506.
[220] Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, p. 321.
[221] Ibid.

individual autonomy and with it, her individuality. As Uglow points out, 'Often women are forced to surrender […] their very identity […] In 'Lizzie Leigh' the father un-names his daughter […]: 'he declared that henceforth they would have no daughter, that she would be as one dead, and her name never more be named'.[222] The removal of all individuality of a woman who has experienced sex serves to tip the balance between 'redemption and ruin' in favour of castigation.[223]

By stripping her of her name and even her appearance, Gaskell demonstrates that women like Lizzie who act on their sexual feelings are treated by society as 'dead' individuals. Interestingly, Kirsteen Douglas from Oliphant's novel *Kirsteen* is castigated by her father in a similar way when she leaves her home after refusing to marry the older Glendochart. The difference between Lizzie and Kirsteen is substantial, however, because unlike Lizzie, Kirsteen flourishes when removed from the restrictive and confining version of domesticity of her family home. Not only does she manage to avoid the mismatched marriage with the much older man, she transforms her identity, beginning a career in the public space as a dressmaker. She takes up residency with her kindly housekeeper Marg'ret's sister, Miss Jean, whose home provides Kirsteen with all-important 'room of her own' in the domestic space from which she can expand her horizons and forge her own identity as an independent, and enterprising, woman. While Lizzie's father attempts to punish his daughter by stripping her of her identity and remove, completely, her autonomy, Kirsteen flourishes when her father disowns her. What appears to be a punishment for Lizzie as a result of her father's ignorance is a positive experience for Kirsteen. She removes her family name from her enterprising identity, choosing to be known instead as 'Miss

[222] Ibid., p. 473.
[223] Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, p. 321.

Kirsteen'. In stating her claim and identity as a woman in her own right, Kirsteen proves that she does not need her father's name, or indeed, a husband, to be successful and to flourish out in the public space. Kirsteen's success enables Oliphant to use her radical voice to demonstrate the possibilities available for women to not only create their own identity, outside of marriage and maternity, but also to have a career out in the public space. Despite Lizzie's castigation, she enables Gaskell to demonstrate something equally as radical: that the castigation and judgement of sexually experienced women was down to the persecutor and not the woman in question. She demonstrates that women like Lizzie and indeed, like Esther and Ruth, were deserving of an identity and of autonomy and that sexuality belonged to all women. By the end of the story, Gaskell returns Lizzie to a state of child-like innocence, when she is comforted by her mother, who 'hushed her on her breast and lulled her as if she were a baby' (p. 31). By highlighting Lizzie's horror at the loss of her child, and her dependency on her own mother during her grief, Gaskell emphasises the humanity of the sexualised woman, and removes from her the guilt society forces her to experience.

Another of Gaskell's 'fallen' women, Ruth Hilton, appears in her second novel published in 1853, *Ruth*. Like Esther and Lizzie, Ruth 'falls' at the hands of a seducer, however, as Uglow points out, 'although Ruth is seduced, she is not a prostitute'.[224] Employed as a seamstress, Ruth is a member of the profession that the Edinburgh surgeon William Tait suggested was made up of women who had a ' looseness in their characters which would lead to the belief that no deception was necessary to decoy them from the path of rectitude'.[225] Both Gaskell and Oliphant employed their radical voices in their novels to negate Tait's assertion, with Oliphant's novel of 1890,

[224] Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, p. 320.
[225] William Tait, *Magdalenism: An Inquiry into the Extent, Causes and Consequences of Prostitution*, (Edinburgh, 1840), p. 82. Quoted in Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 103.

Kirsteen, providing an example of a young woman who thrives as a seamstress, owning a successful dressmaking business and enjoying an identity within the public space. Indeed, in *Ruth*, Gaskell demonstrates that the young girl's seduction is based on much more than a supposedly innate 'looseness' of character borne of her class position and profession. In this next section, I will explore how, through her character Ruth, Gaskell further developed her radical representation of the 'fallen' woman.

Working for redemption

After the public reaction to *Ruth* was less than favourable, Gaskell wrote to Eliza Fox, famously stating that she 'must be an improper woman without knowing it' for producing such an inflammatory piece.[226] Though she light-heartedly appeared to question her own decency after creating a novel that was banned and even burned in some households, *Ruth* gave Gaskell the opportunity to continue the 'rewriting' of the 'fallen' woman that she had started with Esther.[227] Her real concern with the prevailing reaction was, I would argue, not actually with herself and her reputation, but with the intolerant and judgmental individuals who refused to consider an alternative view of the 'fallen' woman, or indeed acknowledge their own part in her situation and creation. Because of these concerns, the character of Ruth Hilton is undoubtedly a complicated one. In her, Gaskell created a protagonist who allowed her to bring into relief the topics of agency and responsibility, highlighting what Terence Wright suggests is the 'clash between morality and nature.' [228] This 'clash', according to Hilary M. Schor is based

[226] Gaskell, *The Letters of Elizabeth Gaskell,* Letter 150 to Eliza Fox, February 1853, pp. 222-223.
[227] Uglow, *A Habit of Stories*, p. 71.
[228] Wright, *Elizabeth Gaskell: 'We are not angels'*, p. 76.

on Ruth's 'own love of natural beauty and confusion of beauty and truth [which eventually result in] her fall.'[229] The conflict between Ruth's apparent lack of sexual understanding in her own 'fall' is something Gaskell does not attempt to hide. Instead, I would suggest that by allowing a level of ambiguity in Ruth's understanding of her own situation, Gaskell is highlighting this 'clash'. Through it, she demonstrates to her readers that simply because Ruth is a young and inexperienced woman, sexual understanding, or at least knowledge, is not impossible and is not a pre-cursor to depravity; instead, it is a 'natural' progression into adulthood. Uglow suggests that 'Ruth's innocence creates problems, the most immediate being its threat to credibility.'[230] For Gaskell, far from being problematic, Ruth's innocence is genuine. Though she gains actual sexual experience through her encounters with Bellingham, her original 'innocence' is never in question and so adds to her 'credibility' as a representation of a young woman with a natural sexuality. Indeed, because Ruth's representation is so credible, it helps Gaskell to educate her readers, reiterating the importance of viewing sexuality as a part of many women's lives. As Flint points out, despite some criticism on *Ruth*'s publication, it was 'warmly welcomed in some quarters [with] G.H. Lewes, writing in the *Westminster Review* […] that the novel might have a special appeal for those who found themselves in the heroine's position.'[231] Lewes's comments support Gaskell's intention to educate her readers through her novels. If some critics accepted that *Ruth* was helpful for girls who found themselves pregnant, abandoned, or without position, then not only were Gaskell's novels successful in educating and informing her readers, she was also having a direct impact on the way sexually experienced women were thought about and labelled.

[229] Hilary M. Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell & the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 56.
[230] Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories,* p. 325.
[231] Flint, *The Woman Reader,* p. 146.

When Mrs Mason is selecting 'her young ladies' ahead of a night mending dresses at the ball where Ruth meets Bellingham, she actively chooses the young women whose appearance is the most pleasing and attractive (p. 11). In direct contrast with Esther's love for 'artificials' and showy clothing, Ruth's 'best frock' (p. 12) is 'her 'Sunday black silk' which is 'somewhat worn and shabby' (p. 12). For Bick, this lack of 'interest in owning […] finery' demonstrates Ruth's 'self-effacing' approach to her own 'beauty'.[232] Though Ruth states that she knows she is 'pretty' (p. 12), her straightforward assertion of the fact removes any vanity that such a statement may have suggested. In addition, Ruth does not consider clothing to be something she uses as a tool to augment the attractiveness of her physical form. By stating that she 'did not know [she would] have to think about [her own] dress at all' (p. 12), Ruth adheres to what Bick calls her lack of 'interest' in 'finery.'[233] Though Ruth's attitude to her own appearance is, on one level, 'self-effacing', I would argue that through it, Gaskell is demonstrating that knowledge of personal attractiveness does not automatically equal an innately bad nature.[234] Ruth is not simply, as Bick points out, 'self-effacing' because it enables her to create the illusion that she is not vain; Ruth willingly acknowledges her beauty because it is a part of what Wright calls her 'nature.'[235] For Ruth, this innate knowledge is problematic because it leaves her open to the dangers of 'seduction'. It is this very difficulty that, I suggest, Gaskell uses to demonstrate how Ruth's beauty is subverted and eroticised by Bellingham, who transforms it from its natural, innocent and even straight-forward state into something more dangerous and sexualised. As Schor asserts, 'Ruth's disassociated beauty marks her out for her seducer […] who she meets only because she is more beautiful than the other

[232] Bick, "Take Her Up Tenderly", p. 22.
[233] Ibid.
[234] Ibid.
[235] Wright, *Elizabeth Gaskell: 'We are not angels',* p. 76.

seamstresses.'[236] Indeed, I would argue that Gaskell uses Ruth's 'disassociated' feelings towards her beauty as a potentially sexually attractive tool, to highlight the male seducer who must accept his share of culpability in the woman's 'fall'. As Uglow suggests, 'Gaskell attacks those who have contributed to Ruth's fall.'[237] This 'attack' is a successful and powerful one because, as Auerbach argues, Gaskell makes Ruth a 'victim rather than agent.'[238]

When Ruth first encounters Bellingham, she is described as a 'kneeling figure […] habited in black up to the throat' (p. 15) Her 'kneeling' position coupled with her 'habited' attire offer up religious undertones, with Ruth appearing almost nun-like in her posture and appearance. Much like Esther's final outfit of 'white or light-coloured clothes', Ruth's 'Sunday black silk' (p. 12) acts a symbol of purity, and as her 'Sunday' dress, Ruth wears the same item of clothing when she attends church and is at her most 'respectable'. Despite Ruth's dress being black, as opposed to the more obvious colour associated with purity, white, it is only when Bellingham thinks of Ruth as sexually attractive that its colour takes on a more complex and sexualised meaning. Before his acknowledgment of it, Ruth wears the black garment as signalling qualities such as piety and restraint; keeping it as her 'respectable' Sunday best. Though she is unable to afford a new dress and it has been reduced to a 'worn and shabby' (p. 12) state, its place as her church-going outfit renders it higher and more 'respectable' than any other garment she owns. When Bellingham hands Ruth a 'camellia' (p. 16) as thanks for her work on a lady friend's dress and she places the 'snowy white' flower in her 'bosom' (p. 17), both Ruth and her dress suddenly take on an erotic and sexualised undertone. The items now add what Logan terms 'the erotic

[236] Schor, *Scheherazade in the Marketplace*, p. 60.
[237] Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, p. 324.
[238] Auerbach, 'The Rise of the Fallen Woman', p. 31.

component of seduction'; Bellingham has read sexuality into Ruth's 'Sunday black silk' (p. 12) and has transformed her (in his eyes, at least) into 'the girl in black' (p. 17).[239] His recognition of her 'tall, slight figure' and her 'rich auburn hair' (p. 17) mark Ruth out from the rest of the 'milliner's apprentices' who are gathered at the 'side-door' (p. 17) and turn her into something other and almost exotic. Despite Ruth attending the ball as a 'temporary ladies'-maid' (p. 12), Bellingham is attracted by her difference from his partner, the 'flippant, bright, artificial girl who sat to be observed with an air as haughty as a queen on her throne.' (p. 15). Ruth's need to work as a seamstress coupled with her own 'worn and shabby' (p. 12) dress clearly demonstrate her difference from the upper class women who are attending the ball for entertainment. As Kalikoff points out, for Bellingham, Ruth's 'poverty becomes an alluring erotic addition, like red hair or a foreign accent.'[240] Her placement of the 'camellia' (p. 16) in her 'bosom' (p. 17) draws Bellingham's attentions to her further and its stark 'snowy white' (p. 17) appearance next to her 'black silk' (p. 12) further accentuates its position on her body. Ruth's appreciation of the 'exquisite beauty' (p. 17) of the flower demonstrates her 'own love of natural beauty', as argued by Schor, but it also inextricably links Ruth with Bellingham's sexualisation of her.[241] Her innate realisation of her own beauty has now been distorted by him into something much more erotic. In a conversation with Jenny after the ball, Ruth exclaims that the flower is 'So pure!' (p. 18). While its colour is indeed symbolic of purity, the camellia has simultaneously become a symbol for Ruth's sexualisation. As Uglow argues, 'Ruth's whiteness is a protective colouring […] [but] Duality, rather than consistency, marks

[239] Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing*, p. 41.
[240] Kalikoff, 'The Falling Woman in Three Victorian Novels', p. 361.
[241] Schor, *Scheherazade in the Marketplace*, p. 57.

Gaskell's use of the imagery of flowers […] She is both white and scarlet […] the snowdrop and the spoilt flower.'[242]

This sexualisation becomes inseparably linked with Ruth's appreciation of the natural world around her. After a walk with Bellingham, where 'she forgot all doubt and awkwardness […] in her delight at the new tender beauty of an early spring day in February' (p. 40), Ruth begins to question her feelings of guilt and in turn, her own conscience. In words that closely echo Gaskell's self-questioning after the publication of the novel, Ruth agonises over her own motives: 'There must be something wrong in me, myself, to feel so guilty when I have done nothing which is not right' (p. 41). The beauty that she once accepted as normal and innate is now somehow altered and tinged with a sense of responsibility and guilt, the origins of which Ruth is unable to understand. At this point, she is 'not conscious' (p. 41) that her uncomfortable feelings are attached to her attraction to Bellingham because, so far, even these feelings have been as innate as those she attributes to the natural world around her and so are not borne of an inherent wickedness. Schor suggests that 'for Gaskell, morality is never absolutely fixed' with the 'good characters' existing in a 'state of moral doubt and debate' and the 'evil characters' living in 'a world where their actions are always right, because they have already set a moral code and no longer need to make judgements.'[243] While I would agree that Ruth is undoubtedly in a 'state of moral doubt' over her growing appreciation of Bellingham's presence, Gaskell was also keen to demonstrate this self-debate not because Ruth's doubt is based on a pre-meditated and calculated lapse in goodness, but because it is based on precisely the opposite.[244] It is Ruth's innocence that causes her to battle with her conscience after

[242] Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories,* pp. 328-329.
[243] Schor, *Scheherazade in the Marketplace*, p. 70.
[244] Ibid.

she spends time with Bellingham, and this is far more startling for her than if she fully understood the source of her growing discomfort. Here, again, Gaskell's radical voice comes to the fore as she demonstrates to her readers the important role the novelist plays in revealing 'the complex and overlapping realities' that make up individual characters.[245] Like Esther, Ruth is not simply a seduced and sexualised young woman, but she is a young woman with sexuality. For Gaskell, encouraging her readers to recognise the difference is crucial. By showing Ruth grappling with her conscience over her attraction to Bellingham, Gaskell reinforces the idea that women who experience sexuality outside of wedlock are not innately bad. Women are more than their sexuality, but sexuality is undoubtedly one of the 'overlapping realities' that make up the individual.[246]

Later in the novel, while sitting at the edge of a pond with Bellingham, Ruth's enjoyment of the natural world ventures into the sensual. Though she remains almost child-like, sitting 'quite still' (p. 74) while he arranges some 'water-lilies' (p. 74) in her hair, she feels that it is 'pleasant to forget everything except his pleasure' (p. 74). Again, Bellingham's addition of the natural flower to Ruth's body emphasises her sexuality, just as the 'camellia' did (p. 16). As Bick notes, 'Gaskell connects Ruth to the natural world, not to stress [her] "earthiness" but to underscore her deplorable lack of basic knowledge and reasoning ability.'[247] Instead of Gaskell demonstrating Ruth's ignorance of her situation in order to free her from any responsibility in it, I would argue that she is suggesting Ruth simply does not make the link between spending time with Bellingham and danger. Indeed, as Flint notes, throughout her time outdoors there are 'hints of barely understood passion on Ruth's part which are suggested by

[245] Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?*, p. 71.
[246] Ibid.
[247] Bick, "Take Her Up Tenderly", p. 22.

Gaskell through [Ruth's] responses to nature.[248] For Ruth, her enjoyment of Bellingham's company is as straightforward and innocent as the pleasure she takes in spending time outdoors, enjoying nature. By adding the flower to Ruth's hair, Bellingham is altering her love of the natural by using it as a physical adornment which emphasises sexuality. Ruth is aware that the situation offers up pleasure, but for her, it does not venture into the sexual. When she looks at her reflection in the pool, though she feels a momentary 'sense of satisfaction' at her beauty, 'she never thought of associating it with herself', seeing it instead as something 'abstract, and removed from herself' (p. 74). For Bick, 'Ruth has been seduced, "ruined," not by the evil propensities that were often considered the marks of her fellow sinners - vanity, laziness, ambition – but by possession of those qualities so valued in Victorian womanhood: obedience and docility.'[249] I would suggest that it is precisely Ruth's 'valued' qualities that Gaskell highlights to reinforce how 'fallenness' was not the punishment of a 'sinner', but was something that could happen to any woman, even those women who were supposedly 'valued in Victorian womanhood.'[250] Certainly, Ruth blurs the boundaries between what Lynda Nead terms the 'feminine ideal' who stood for 'normal, acceptable sexuality' and the 'deviant, dangerous' woman who took part in 'illicit sex.'[251] To Ruth's understanding, her relationship with Bellingham is perfectly 'normal', natural, and without 'deviant' qualities.[252] It is Bellingham's sexualisation of her that transforms these actions into something much more 'illicit' and subversive. Though Ruth is involved in her own 'fall', her role within it is borne

[248] Flint, *The Woman Reader*, p. 147.
[249] Bick, "Take Her Up Tenderly", p. 23.
[250] Ibid.
[251] Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 95.
[252] Ibid.

of what Auerbach terms as a form of 'sexlessness.'[253] Though she has sexuality, it is a sexuality that she does not recognise as attractive to a potential seducer. As a result, its dangers go unrecognised, so Ruth becomes involved in what Auerbach labels the 'kinship between the fallen woman and the pure little girl.'[254] Her inability to recognise her beauty as sexually attractive makes her both an implicit agent in her 'fall' and simultaneously a victim of its cause: seduction by Bellingham.

Ruth's rejoicing at her pregnancy highlights Gaskell's attempts to demonstrate that simply because a woman had taken part in what was viewed as a sexual 'indiscretion', the potential consequence of a pregnancy need not signal further degradation. Nead's assertion that having children '[…] was constructed as the apex of feminine purity', means Ruth's overjoyed reaction to the news that she is to have a child again places her in the conflicted position between a 'fallen' woman and, simultaneously, an example of 'feminine purity'.[255] Ruth's pregnancy also provides Gaskell with another opportunity of putting rigid ideas of 'purity' into doubt. Her child will be the direct result of a seduction, yet if having children is the most pure thing a woman can do, then Ruth's (or indeed any other woman's) 'fallen' state cannot possibly be wholly, and perpetually, degraded. Like Esther who, despite her role as a prostitute, maintained both her place within the domestic space and her identity as Mary's aunt, Ruth, too, will gain an important role in the domestic space as a mother. Radically, through Ruth's pregnancy Gaskell reiterates again that sexually-experienced women should have a place within the extended version of domesticity that both hers and Oliphant's novels reveal. Additionally, Ruth's innocent and joyful

[253] Auerbach, 'The Rise of the Fallen Woman', p. 49.
[254] Ibid.
[255] Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, p. 26.

exclamation on hearing the news of her pregnancy suggests an innate social innocence regarding her actions.

I would argue that Gaskell is suggesting that it is actually those around Ruth who are determined to see her as 'depraved' (p. 118), for not understanding the consequences of her 'fall.'[256] For Wright, there is a problem with the goodness involved in Ruth's 'rejoicing at her pregnancy [as the] natural product of motherhood'.[257] He questions how the 'spontaneous, natural act' of sex could be seen as sinful, if the 'rejoicing' at the product of the act is not.[258] I would argue that Gaskell attempts to demonstrate that the 'fallen' woman's pregnancy was as worthy of joy as one whose pregnancy was not the result of a sexual transgression. Through the words of Thurstan Benson, the Dissenting minister who takes Ruth into his home, Gaskell points out that 'The sin appears […] quite distinct from its consequences' (p. 119). As a result, she demonstrates that the 'consequence' of Ruth's 'sin' is an innocent baby; a baby who has nothing to do with the act which brought it into being and whose birth is worthy of 'rejoicing'. Though Ruth took part in the act that resulted in her pregnancy, she maintains her 'feminine purity' because she is not aware of the implications of her actions.[259] Though Ruth has 'fallen', her 'fall' was not the result of prostitution; nor does she become a prostitute. Therefore, she does not venture into what Nead terms the 'unnatural state of the prostitute [whose] deviation from the functions of the 'natural' feminine ideal' meant she should not take part in motherhood.[260] I would argue that, for Gaskell, the 'feminine ideal' is impossible to

[256] This idea of an enforced 'depravity' is taken up by Thomas Hardy in his novel of 1891, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles.* It can be found, most notably, in Tess's father's reaction to her baby and in Angel Clare's disgust on hearing of Tess's time with Alec. To read these sections, see: Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008).
[257] Wright, *Elizabeth Gaskell: 'We are not angels'*, p. 76.
[258] Ibid.
[259] Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, p. 26.
[260] Ibid., p. 100.

define and that instead, women such as Ruth and indeed, Esther experience different circumstances and situations all of which Gaskell's (and indeed, Oliphant's) novels show to be acceptable. Whether a prostitute or a seduced young girl, I would argue that Gaskell is not prepared to assign differing levels of 'unnaturalness' to women. Instead, as Epstein Nord suggests, Gaskell demonstrated the idea that 'Ruth might have been a prostitute, but a prostitute might well be Ruth or someone like her'; either way, she attempted to suggest that it was unhelpful and dangerous to assign labels to women based on how their sexuality was judged.[261] Instead, through her female characters, Gaskell's radical voice demonstrates that the ability to give birth to a child is a normal process for women, including unmarried women, and has nothing to do with society's notions of 'natural' or 'unnatural' states of womanhood.[262]

The birth of Ruth's son, Leonard, coupled with her adoption of the name 'Mrs Denbigh' (p. 130) and the identity of the widow, provide Ruth with what Hattaway terms 'redemption', thanks to the 'rescuing embrace' of her 'surrogate family', the Bensons.[263] Indeed, the Bensons' somewhat 'unorthodox' family construct offers Ruth and Leonard sanctuary in domesticity, while also reinforcing Gaskell's and Oliphant's radical suggestion of the importance of extending domesticity so that it includes families who do not fit into the 'ideal' mould of a mother, father, and children.[264] Indeed, modifying her social identity enables Ruth to become a part of what Hattaway terms 'the sanctity of the domestic sphere', though I would argue that the need for a sense of 'redemption' lies with the Bensons, rather than with Ruth.[265] Miss Benson's sense of Ruth's 'sin' and 'wrong' (p. 130) actions, coupled with her uncertainty over

[261] Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 161.
[262] Ibid.
[263] Hattaway, "Such a Strong Wish for Wings", p. 674.
[264] Stoneman, 'Gaskell, gender and the family', p. 143.
[265] Hattaway, "Such a Strong Wish for Wings", p. 675.

the young mother's situation, lead her to suggest that Ruth should take on the name 'Mrs Denbigh' as her new 'widow' identity, because it was her own 'mother's name' (p. 130). By taking on the name of a 'respectable' married woman while existing in the 'domestic sphere', Ruth is almost adopting its 'sanctity'. For Hattaway, Ruth's position in 'the English home [means she] 'is imbued with a transformative power that halts the deadly metamorphosis [of her] fall'.[266] I would argue that Ruth's return to domesticity reiterates Gaskell's suggestion that all women, regardless of their past situation, have a place within the domestic space. Indeed, the domestic space offers time and space for recuperation, reflection, and rehabilitation which removes the idea of a 'deadly metamorphosis' as the result of a sexual experience.[267] Indeed, Ruth's adoption of the name 'Mrs Denbigh' places her in a position of strength, particularly because Bellingham too has taken on the pseudonym of 'Mr Donne' under the ruse of taking ownership of 'some property' (p. 440). This change in his identity means, as Bick points out, that their 'roles have been reversed.'[268] In taking on the 'Donne' name, Bellingham has revoked his history with Ruth and as a result, her attraction to him has been diminished. As Bick suggests, 'now Ruth dares to reason, to exert her will – ultimately to act.'[269] Further to this, Ruth declares that it will be her own 'agency' (p. 303) which determines her future actions. As a result, as Auerbach points out, Ruth 'vehemently rejects marriage to her seducer'.[270]

By allowing Ruth to turn down what Auerbach terms 'conventional salvation through [the] respectability of a marriage', I would suggest that Gaskell demonstrates that despite Ruth being the victim of seduction, her decision to turn down a marriage

[266] Ibid., p. 675.
[267] Ibid.
[268] Bick, "Take Her Up Tenderly", p. 24.
[269] Ibid.
[270] Auerbach, 'The Rise of the Fallen Woman', p. 41.

proposal from her seducer allows her to remove his power over her.[271] By rejecting Bellingham, Ruth is creating 'salvation' for herself; a salvation that could not be created by what Bick terms the 'façade' of such a marriage.[272] While Ruth's tragic death at the end of the novel could, as Bick suggests, be read as Gaskell resorting to the convention of the 'fallen' 'woman as victim', we might instead see Ruth's premature demise as preceded by a form of redemption and even victory.[273] As Wright suggests, Ruth's son, the direct product of her 'fall', grows up as a 'healthy boy […] ultimately [able to] accept his illegitimacy'.[274] Though Ruth dies, the moral integrity she taught her son progressively lives on. As a result, Gaskell suggests that despite Bellingham causing Ruth's 'fall', he also contributes to her 'salvation' through his co-creation of Leonard.

Gaskell courted controversy in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth* in her depictions of 'fallen' women who were unmarried mothers. In her later novels, *North and South* (1855) and *Wives and Daughters* (1865) and in her novella *Cousin Phillis* (1864) she chose to shift the focus away from more overt examples of female sexuality to explore the topic in more subtle and nuanced ways. In *North and South*, Gaskell began the exploration of a young woman whose sexuality is revealed along with a subtle shift onto the periphery of the domestic and public spaces. The novel's central female character, Margaret Hale, is by no means a conventionally 'fallen' woman because she does not experience sex outside marriage. Nevertheless, Margaret does face the realities of her own sexuality. She experiences an awakening sexuality which has the power to influence her actions and shape her understanding; precipitating her into the public sphere and affecting the way others perceive her.

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[271] Ibid.
[272] Bick, "Take Her Up Tenderly", p. 25.
[273] Ibid.
[274] Wright, '*Elizabeth Gaskell: 'We are not angels'*, pp. 78-79.

Public displays of "Impropriety"?

Two years after the publication of *Ruth*, Gaskell published a second social-problem novel (her first being *Mary Barton*) which was also set in Manchester, *North and South*. Fortified by the reception of her earlier works, she wrote the novel, as Schor suggests, 'with the progress from *Mary Barton* to *Ruth* behind her, and with a sharper awareness of the complexities of women's lives all around her.'[275] Undoubtedly, the earlier novels had enabled Gaskell to demonstrate not only the subtle differences she saw in women's own experiences of sexuality, but also the crucial importance she placed on domestic experience and the space domesticity offered women of all backgrounds and situations for reflection, recuperation, education, and personal growth. *North and South* continues this demonstration. Unlike Esther and Ruth, Margaret is not seduced, nor does she succumb to a complete sexual experience. Instead, Gaskell finds in her character Margaret a way to use her radical voice to demonstrate to her readers a woman located within extended domesticity whose identity helps her not only to negotiate her life between the domestic and the public spaces, but also to come to an understanding of her sexuality.

To begin the exploration of Margaret's role within extended domesticity I will look first to a famous scene from the novel which exemplifies her place within it and her blurring of the boundaries between the domestic and the public spaces. During a visit to Mr Thornton's home, Margaret physically intervenes in an escalating

[275] Schor, *Scheherazade in the Marketplace*, p. 121.

disturbance between him and his workers (the following quotation is extensive, but necessary to my analysis):

> "Mr Thornton," said Margaret, shaking all over with her passion, "go down this instant if you are not a coward. Go down and face them like a man […] if you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man!"
> […] She [threw] the door open wide […] she stood between [the men] and their enemy […] The hootings rose and filled the air – but Margaret did not hear them. […] Another moment, and Mr. Thornton might be smitten down – he whom she had urged and goaded to come to this perilous place. She only thought how she could save him. She threw her arms around him; she made her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond.
> […] "Go away," said he, in his deep voice. "This is no place for you."
> "It is," said she. "You did not see what I saw." If she thought her sex would be a protection – if, with shrinking eyes, she had turned away from the terrible anger of these men, in any hope that ere she looked again they would have paused and reflected, and slunk away, and vanished – she was wrong.
> […] A sharp pebble flew by her, grazing forehead and cheek, and drawing a blinding sheet of light before her eyes. She lay like one dead on Mr. Thornton's shoulder. […] Only one voice cried out –
> "Th' stone were meant for thee; but thou wert sheltered behind a woman!"[276]

Margaret's position in the scene is a complicated one. Though she acts initially from within the domestic space of Thornton's home, her physical protection of him from the angry crowd in the mill-yard which separates his home from the mill, shifts her position, moving her onto the periphery of domesticity. As soon as Margaret steps outside after throwing 'the door open wide […] [and standing] between [the men] and their enemy' (p. 211) she enters the territory of extended domesticity. This means that she is no longer within the domestic but is located within the public space of the mill-yard.

Margaret makes clear her position when she decides to become directly involved in the industrial, and therefore public, dispute between Thornton and his men.

[276] Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), pp. 209-213. All further references will be made within the body of the text.

In her exploration of Margaret's role, Williams Elliott looks to her part as a mediator in what she terms 'the social sphere.'[277] According to Williams Elliott, the 'social sphere' was located, technically, between the private and the public spaces and was a space designated for women who left their home as a visitor, often in a mediating or philanthropic capacity.[278] Because the 'social sphere' involved women using their influence outside of their own home, it could be defined also as a 'public realm'.[279] The 'social sphere' works as a place for women, asserts Williams Elliott, because their role within it 'does not threaten the position of the paid male professional', nor does it 'challenge the private arrangements of the domestic sphere where men rule over women legally, sexually, and emotionally.'[280] Stoneman, too, explores Margaret's position in the novel, particularly at the point of the riot. She suggests that though Margaret 'might still seem to be exercising "influence" in a traditional way, […] her intervention in the riot constitutes a startling excursion into the public sphere.'[281] I would argue that Margaret's position within extended domesticity in the riot scene is a unique one which is not entirely explained by either Williams Elliott or Stoneman. Extended domesticity differs from the 'social sphere' and the public sphere because it is an extended version of domesticity which reaches to the periphery of the public space. Imp9ortantly, it provides room for women to forge and develop their own identities. While, like Williams Elliott's idea of the 'social sphere', extended domesticity complicates the boundaries between the domestic and public spaces, it differs from it because it suggests that domesticity offers a crucial and necessary space for women to grow, educate themselves, and even move into a public existence.

[277] Williams Elliott, 'The Female Visitor', p. 26.
[278] Ibid.
[279] Ibid.
[280] Ibid., p. 22; p. 26.
[281] Stoneman, 'Gaskell, gender and the family', pp. 138-139.

Margaret's position (both literally and metaphorically) between Thornton and the rioters is made possible because of her command of the domestic space and not despite it.

While it cannot be denied that Margaret's growing romantic feelings for Thornton play a part in 'her passion' (p. 209) as she commands him to speak to his workers 'man to man' (p. 209) , her insistence is due equally to her understanding of the workers' position and their rage 'beyond measure at discovering Irishmen were to be brought in to rob their little ones of bread' (p. 210). As Williams Elliott notes in her discussion about women's roles as mediators, Gaskell realised that women could use their skills in mediation 'to represent the potentially opposed interests or experiences of different groups to each other'.[282] Margaret's position in the riot scene is a combination both of her feelings for Thornton and her desire to communicate the workers' difficulties to him. Indeed, she has witnessed first-hand the effects of poverty and its associated problems due to her visits to her friends, the Higgins' household. Margaret's role within extended domesticity is crucial to the situation. As Gaskell managed the 'pragmatic negotiation' between her domestic role with her family and her public role as a successful author, so Margaret negotiates between her understanding and care for the workers (care which has been fostered in the domestic space) and her growing feelings for Thornton which have influenced her actions on the periphery of the public space.[283] Indeed, Margaret's passion for Thornton is perhaps at its clearest in the riot scene, and the internal struggle she experiences because of it serves only to intensify it and make it more real. Margaret's position between extreme concern and extreme passion enables Gaskell to demonstrate to her

[282] Williams Elliott, 'The Female Visitor', pp. 38-39.
[283] Stoneman, 'Gaskell, gender and the family', p. 132-133.

readers how her role within extended domesticity has begun Margaret's gradual recognition of her sexuality. This is exemplified clearly by the abstract nature of her thoughts and her actions when she imagines Thornton being hurt and 'only thought how she could save him. She threw her arms around him; she made her body into a shield' (p. 211). Here, Gaskell's role as a novelist enables her to become the space between her readers and Margaret, uncovering what Billington calls 'her creatures' secret inner lives'.[284] In a discussion about George Eliot's portrayal of Janet Dempster's struggle in her novella, *Janet's Repentance*, Billington explores how Eliot uses a free indirect narrative mode to reveal thoughts which 'belong neither internally to character, nor externally to narrator, but exist between the two.'[285] This is, according to Billington, 'the realist novel's most sophisticated tool for emotional attunement, for listening in to its creatures, hearing thoughts that are often inadmissible or unavailable to the individuals who most need to have or to hear them'.[286] I would argue that Gaskell does something very similar for Margaret, becoming her voice for the reader when the realisation of her burgeoning sexuality overpowers her. The overarching strength of Margaret's thought, 'She only thought how she could save him' (p. 211), appears to be considered simultaneously within her and outside of her. Gaskell steps in to make clear the strength of emotion that Margaret cannot yet put into words but can only think. This is Gaskell's radicalism writ large, as she begins the unveiling of Margaret's sexuality at a primal level, providing her readers with the opportunity to listen in to Margaret's inner thoughts. Her recognition of her sexuality is a powerful force, which has been fostered through her position in extended domesticity. Margaret's physical actions occur in a similar way to her thoughts. When she throws

[284] Billington, Is Literature Healthy?, p. 75.
[285] Ibid.; For *Janet's Repentance* see: George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
[286] Ibid.

'her arms around [Thornton making] her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond' (pp. 211-212), she does it both knowingly and automatically, driven on unconsciously by her sexuality. Though Margaret 'risks social opprobrium by appearing in public' to physically rescue Thornton, Gaskell makes clear that her innate sexuality is the driving force behind her actions.[287] Again, as she did with Ruth and Esther, Gaskell uses her radical voice to suggest to her readers that sexuality is a human response innate to many women. She guides her readers to 'emotional attunement' with her female characters, demonstrating that Margaret's feelings for Thornton are as valid as her concern for the workers and their plight.[288] In other words, Margaret's sexuality is a human emotional response which occurs innately, and which is instinctive.

Margaret's instinctiveness is demonstrated again, later in the novel, when she lies to a police inspector about her whereabouts on the night her brother Frederick's enemy, Leonards, dies. After taking part in a naval mutiny, a fugitive Frederick returns to his family. To help him escape to safety, Margaret accompanies her brother to the railway station. Once there, the pair is accosted by Frederick's fellow sailor, Leonards, who wishes to turn him in for a reward. A scuffle ensues, and a drunken Leonards is tripped and falls to the ground, later dying of his injuries. In a panic, Margaret helps her brother to board a train and escape. The next day, the inspector visits Margaret at home, with a suspicion that she was present at the scene of the accident:

> "there is some slight evidence to prove that the blow, or push, or scuffle that caused the fall, was provoked by this poor fellow's half-tipsy impertinence to a young lady, walking with the man who pushed the deceased over the edge of the platform […] There is also some reason to identify the lady with yourself […]"
>
> "I was not there," said Margaret.

[287] Stoneman, 'Gaskell, gender and the family', p. 139.
[288] Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?*, p. 75.

> […] The lady standing before him showed no emotion, no fluttering fear, no anxiety, no desire to end the interview […].
>
> "Then, madam, I have your denial that you were the lady accompanying the gentleman who struck the blow, or gave the push, which caused the death of this poor man?"
>
> A quick, sharp pain went through Margaret's brain. "Oh God! that I knew Frederick were safe!" […]
>
> "I was not there," said she, slowly and heavily. (pp. 324-325)

Like Phoebe Beecham from Oliphant's *Phoebe Junior*, Margaret is 'forced by necessity to take control within her own family [but she also] emerge[s] from its protection, walking the streets and speaking directly to people of different classes'.[289] Just as when she acted as a shield for Thornton earlier in the novel, so she risks herself again on behalf of her brother. Gaskell's radical voice can be heard again here, as she demonstrates how Margaret's plan to help Frederick escape is informed by the skills she has acquired in the domestic space. Indeed, Margaret takes control of her family after her Mother's death and it is this experience which strengthens her ability to negotiate between the domestic and the public spaces. For Margaret, helping her brother is an act borne out of love, so she does not consider any possible repercussions. Her repeat denial to the police that she 'was not there' (p. 325) when the accident took place is intended to save Frederick from arrest and is evidenced by the 'quick, sharp pain' (p. 325) she experiences when she makes her denial for the second time, hoping silently for his safety. Though Margaret acts with the best of intentions, Williams Elliott points out how, 'Mrs Thornton twice interprets activities Margaret defines as pure and noble as sexually motivated (the riot and her walk with Frederick)'.[290] Because she is out in a public place with what appears to be a strange man, Margaret is judged harshly. Like Esther and Ruth, 'as a result of her indiscreet public behaviour,

[289] Stoneman, 'Gaskell, gender and the family', pp. 138-139.
[290] Williams Elliott, 'The Female Visitor', pp. 45-46.

Margaret is dangerously close to being associated with […] the prostitute'.[291] Gaskell reiterates the unfairness of such judgemental attitudes which deem women who venture into the public space as subversive and 'fallen'.

It cannot be denied however, that Margaret's sexuality plays a part in her fear over her lie to the inspector. While she does not fear being caught out by the police for her untruth, she is horrified to think that Thornton believes her to be a liar after he witnessed her at the railway station with Fredrick and knows her denial to be false:

> If she had but dared to bravely tell the truth as regarded herself, defying them to find out what she refused to tell concerning another, how light of heart she would have felt! Not humbled before God, as having failed in trust towards Him; not degraded and abased in Mr Thornton's sight […] How was it that he haunted her imagination so persistently? What could it be? Why did she care for what he thought […] why did she tremble and hide her face in the pillow? What strong feeling had overtaken her at last? (p.339).

Here again is the free indirect line of questioning first used by Margaret when she stepped in to save Thornton from the baying crowd. Here again is her 'secret inner life'.[292] Once more, Gaskell's narratorial voice poses the questions which are innate in Margaret. While she is concerned that she has failed in the eyes of God, her fear that she is 'degraded and abased' (p. 339) in Thornton's eyes is much worse. In her discussion of *Janet's Repentance*, Billington suggests that the 'novel […] takes the place of the ancient religious practice of confession […] a secular replacement for religious discourse'.[293] I would argue that Gaskell offers something similar for her readers, with Margaret's questioning leading to the dawning realisation and confession of her feelings for Thornton. The indirect line of questioning, 'What could it be? Why did she care for what he thought?' (p. 339), allows, and almost asks, the reader to come to their own conclusions about Margaret's innate sexuality, and as result, try to

[291] Anne Longmuir, 'Consuming Subjects', p. 247.
[292] Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?*, p. 75
[293] Ibid.

understand what they learn about their own. Indeed, her ultimate confession of her feelings and of her sexuality is in her final question, 'What strong feeling had overtaken her at last?' (p. 339) and though posed as a question, the answer is self-evident, and she confesses her love for Thornton to herself. A similar line of self-questioning happens for Margaret later in the novel, after a rebuffed Thornton insists on his apparently quieted feelings for her:

> "What can he mean?" thought Margaret – "what could he mean by speaking to me so, as if I were always thinking that he cared for me, when I know he does not; he cannot. His mother will have said all those cruel things about me to him. But I won't care for him. I surely am mistress enough of myself to control this wild, strange, miserable feeling, which tempted me even to betray my own dear Frederick, so that I might regain his good opinion? – the good opinion of a man who takes such pains to tell me that I am nothing to him. Come! poor little heart! be cheery and brave. We'll be a great deal to one another, if we are thrown off and left desolate.' (p. 391)

As was the case earlier, Margaret's pattern of thinking slips into one of questioning. Again, she asks internal questions of her own and of Thornton's behaviour. This time however, the sexuality which she admitted to herself by the end of the previous passage has taken shape and transformed into something 'wild, strange, [and] miserable' (p. 391). This is because now, Margaret's repeated internal debate is trapped within what Billington calls 'thought-spaces'.[294] These are the gaps between the 'thought and imagination' in which the reality has not yet taken shape.[295] Here, Margaret's thought-space exists in the pause between considering that Thornton does not love her anymore, when she convinces herself 'he does not' (p. 391), and the imagined reality that 'he cannot' (p. 391) because of his awareness of her lie on Frederick's behalf. The small gap between the two thoughts is where Margaret's fear and uncertainty looms, yet is also where Gaskell's radical voice is heard. Margaret can

[294] Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?*, p. 35.
[295] Ibid.

no longer deny her feelings for Thornton which have brought with them an understanding and even acceptance of her sexuality. Within that pause, that small space where she half-admits that she feels 'degraded and abased' (p. 339), Margaret allows herself to not only feel fully her love for Thornton which leaves her 'wild [and] strange', but she also allows herself to feel the anguish of the possible reality of his unrequited love and even, passion. Despite her fears however, Margaret's thoughts are transient, and they are not yet made real. As long as that remains the case, she holds on to the hope that she may still be redeemed in Thornton's eyes. This hope is evidenced when she speaks to her 'poor little heart!', stating 'We'll be a great deal to each other, if we are thrown off and left desolate' (p. 391). The 'if' is crucial and represents the second Margaret realises 'this is not […] the real thing […], [she] can solve this problem.'.[296] In other words, the 'if' represents the moment she realises all is not yet lost and that her fears that Thornton no longer loves her may yet be unfounded. She is not yet 'thrown off and desolate' (p. 391). Margaret's angry and yet anguished feelings allow Gaskell's radicalism to be heard loudly in this passage. Though she states earlier her fears for appearing 'degraded' in Thornton's eyes, (a language choice used often in relation to a 'fallen' woman like Ruth or Esther), Margaret's real concern is with the idea that her 'wild, strange […] feeling' (p. 391) of passion has no outlet. She tries to convince herself that she is 'mistress enough of [her]self' (p. 391) to remain under control when she considers her feelings for Thornton, concerned about how close she came to 'betray[ing]' (p. 391) Frederick by confessing to him the truth about why she was at the station with another man. The language of Margaret's thoughts in relation to Thornton move into the territory of a

[296] Ibid.

sexual undercurrent as her acceptance of her sexuality increases in ways that would not have been possible for Ruth and Esther.

Gaskell's radical approach to the representation of female sexuality as a natural and acceptable part of women's lives is made clear through Margaret who, though she develops an undeniable acceptance of her sexuality, and is assumed by Thornton to have a secret lover, does not, of course, encounter the same level of social punishment as Esther and Ruth, because she does not actually have sex out of wedlock. Instead, Gaskell demonstrates a determination to remove condemnatory labels from sexually knowledgeable or experienced unmarried women by enabling Margaret to not only make decisions about her own future, but also to have the opportunity of being cleared of all guilt and suspicion when Thornton discovers from Higgins the truth about Frederick's visit. Of all of these fortunes however, the one that signals the biggest shift in the outcome for sexually experienced unmarried women, and demonstrates clearly Gaskell's radicalism, is when Margaret is made an heiress when her godfather Mr Bell, dies, leaving her his property. Not only does this mean Margaret is Thornton's 'landlord' (p.503) her inheritance also subverts the outcome of the 'fallen' woman story, when it is she who saves him from a 'fall' of a different kind: a financial fall and the collapse of his business. Thus, Gaskell has moved away from direct representations of transgressive female sexuality to explore wider ideas of 'fallenness' and the complexity of sexual experience for women. In her discussion of how female sexuality and consumerism are connected in the novel, Longmuir argues that, 'women's roles as consumers in the commercial marketplace and as commodities in the sexual marketplace are inextricably linked'.[297] Margaret's 'public' role in the 'commercial marketplace' as a landlord with financial interests and business

[297] Longmuir, 'Consuming Subjects', p. 246.

knowledge prevents her commodification. Not only does Gaskell endow Margaret with a sexuality which is controlled and does not lead to societal condemnation, she goes even further by also providing her with a role that enables her to begin the forging of a public identity, the kind of identity witnessed in Oliphant's novels like *Miss Marjoribanks*. Indeed, at the end of the novel, Lucilla is also made an heiress when her father dies, leaving his money to her. Like Margaret whose capital is put into property, Lucilla invests her inheritance into a large house which she buys with her new husband, so they may start their own estate.

Indeed, Margaret's new role as a landlord confirms her status as an enterprising woman. While before she received her financial inheritance, her management of her domestic space was never in doubt, Margaret's new role now moves her firmly into the public space of business. Indeed, Margaret's movement into her more 'public' role takes place at the close of the novel, when she offers Thornton the opportunity to 'take some money of [hers], eighteen-hundred and fifty-seven pounds, lying just at this moment unused in the bank' (p. 519) so that he may continue his business and keep the mill open. Margaret's business proposition takes place between her and Thornton alone within the domestic space, and despite her feelings for him, she 'was most anxious to have it all looked upon as a business arrangement, in which the principal advantage was on her side' (p. 519). Indeed, Margaret's new financial position means she extends the domestic space so that it becomes a place from which she can forge her new identity as an enterprising and financially independent business woman. Despite her concern that her advisor Henry Lennox might have 'done it [made the deal] so much better than I can' (p. 518), she becomes quickly adept at 'turning over some law papers, and statements of accounts' (p. 518), before working out her interest incomings and discovering that Thornton can bring her a better rate than the 'two and

a half percent' (p. 519) she currently receives. Not only is the financial advantage on Margaret's side, the emotional advantage is, too. Now that Margaret has saved Thornton from financial ruin, and demonstrated her business acumen, their marriage will be on more equal terms. Again, like the marriages of Oliphant's Lucilla Marjoribanks and Phoebe Beecham, whose political acumen give rise to the creation and management of their husbands' political careers, Gaskell too uses Margaret to demonstrate the ability of women to manage and thrive within professional careers, and the irrationality of the social taboos which prevented them. To reinforce Margaret's shift onto the periphery of the public space at the close of the novel, Thornton 'lay[s] her arms as they had once before been placed to protect him from the rioters' (p. 520). In returning Margaret to the act which first signalled her complex location between the domestic and the public spaces, and of her growing feelings for Thornton, Gaskell signals her development as an enterprising woman. Not only has she forged a financially independent identity, she has also accepted her sexuality, which she is given permission to express through her partnership with Thornton.

Gaskell continues the exploration of a nuanced and subtle version of female sexuality which she began with Margaret, in her novella of 1864, *Cousin Phillis.* Like Margaret, Phillis does not experience a sexual act. Instead, she is an example of a young woman with a dawning sexuality who is eager to enter adulthood as a thinking, educated individual.

A Dawning Sexuality

Cousin Phillis is centred around Phillis Holman, a young woman who, as Heather Glen notes in her introduction to the Oxford edition of the novella, is 'eager to learn and

think for herself, straightforwardly accepting […] her own dawning sexuality'.[298] Published in 1864, some fifteen years after Mary Barton, and ten years after Ruth, the story charts Phillis's frustrations and disappointments in love, and also her loving, but somewhat cloistered, upbringing. Like Margaret Hale in *North and South* and Cynthia Kirkpatrick in *Wives and Daughters*, Phillis does not actually 'fall' in the sense that she does not undergo a sexual experience; instead, in Phillis, Gaskell provides an example of a young woman whose sexuality emerges alongside a longing to become more independent and, indeed, independently thoughtful. I would argue that this growth is crucial because it allows Gaskell to explore the young woman's move into the adult world, while demonstrating simultaneously how her daily, family life, affects her development. She explores powerfully not only Phillis's placement between adolescence and adult sexuality, but also what Thomas E. Recchio terms as '[an] unspoken dissatisfaction with her current condition, a dissatisfaction connected with her growth, with the transition from an adolescent in pinafores to a young woman, searching for a fuller life and a richer experience'.[299] I will now look at *Cousin Phillis* in closer detail, exploring how Gaskell demonstrates Phillis's emerging sexuality and how her configuring of Phillis's 'dissatisfaction' allows Gaskell to demonstrate what it means for her heroine to make the transition from childhood into adulthood.

One of the most powerful ways Gaskell makes clear the difficult space Phillis inhabits between the child and the adult worlds is the conflict between her childish appearance (which Recchio discusses) and the interest she takes in classical literature and languages. Once again, Gaskell's representation of books as an important educative tool is made central to Phillis's awakening. Indeed, she is educated directly

[298] Heather Glen, 'Introduction' in Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cousin Phillis and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2010) p. xxxii.
[299] Thomas E. Recchio, 'A Victorian Version of the Fall: Mrs Gaskell's *Cousin Phillis* and the Domestication of Myth', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol. 5, (1991), pp. 37-50, p. 43.

by the books she reads. In the following passage, Phillis is in conversation with the story's narrator, her cousin, Paul Manning. Manning has encountered her grappling with the language of Dante's *L'Inferno* and is struck by her interest in the text:

> I softly rose, and as softly went into the kitchen […] I had seen that the book was in a language unknown to me, and the running title was *L'Inferno*. Just as I was making out the relationship of this word to 'infernal', she started and turned around, and, as if continuing her thought as she spoke, she sighed out, -
> 'Oh! It is so difficult! Can you help me?' putting her finger below a line.
> 'Me! I! I don't even know what language it is in!'
> 'Don't you see it is Dante?' she replied, almost petulantly; she did so want help.
> […] A great tall girl in a pinafore, half a head taller than I was, reading books that I had never heard of, and talking about them too, as of far more interest than any mere personal subjects; that was the last day on which I ever thought of my dear cousin Phillis as the possible mistress of my heart and life.[300]

Manning's surprise at Phillis's appearance as 'a great tall girl in a pinafore' (p. 178) is juxtaposed clearly with her mature interest in classical literature and is representative of what Uglow terms Gaskell's 'awareness of the gulf between pictured innocence and the unseen inner life'.[301] Phillis's appearance is jarring because it is out of place. Her intellect does not fit with her childish clothing. Gaskell's representation of Phillis's almost childlike request for help, where she places 'her finger below a line' (p. 177) as a child might when learning to read, only serves to accentuate her maturity. By singling out each word individually, Phillis commands the text and along with it, the situation. Though she requests help from Manning, he is powerless to assist because of his lack of knowledge of the language. Though she has requested help, it is Phillis who knows more about the text than he does, so therefore, she is in control. Phillis is located directly between her outward 'pictured innocence' thanks to her childish clothing, and the inward and 'unseen' strength of her feelings and her

[300] Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cousin Phillis* in *Cousin Phillis and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2010) pp. 156-244, pp. 177-179. Further references will be made in the body of the text.
[301] Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, pp. 538-539.

intelligence.[302] Her frustration with the language mirrors her own internal struggle of not being able to put into words the life transition she is experiencing. As a result, as Recchio suggests, a 'tension [exists] between the activity of Phillis's mind and her limited circumstances'.[303] Not only is Phillis physically transforming into a woman, her surroundings are deterring her from enriching her mind. Recchio points out that Phillis's book of choice, Dante's *L'Inferno*, is interesting because of its 'myriad of associations of pain, restlessness, despair, and insatiable thirst'.[304] Indeed, I would argue that Gaskell's choice of literature for Phillis to ponder over is deliberate. Its associations with the fall of man, human sin, struggle, and suffering demonstrate a young woman at odds with her own unquiet mind, and filled with a curiosity for knowledge and experience, not only in sexual terms, but in intellectual terms, also. Phillis is not meant to endure an initial seduction or experience a sexual encounter in the same way as Esther or Ruth. Instead, she takes part in what Recchio calls a 'quiet rebellion'.[305] This rebellion marks an intellectual move away from the safety and security of her home and family and into a world of experience beyond it. Phillis's initial experience of the adult world comes not from a sexual encounter, but instead from literature and the world of experience it uncovers. Phillis receives an education from books in two ways: on the one hand, her education is literal because she is learning and understanding new languages. On the other hand, the books provide Phillis with an emotional education, opening her mind to her awakening sexuality and the world beyond the boundaries of her home. Indeed, it is precisely through reading at home that Phillis has access to the benefits offered by extended domesticity. Her

[302] Ibid.
[303] Recchio, 'A Victorian Version of the Fall', p. 44.
[304] Ibid., p. 43.
[305] Ibid., p. 44.

reading offers not only education, but also a desire for something beyond the domestic, and even out in the public space.

It is Phillis's deep interest in her books and their translation that eventually leads to her falling in love with Edward Holdsworth, whose ability to speak Italian means he can help with her translations into English. Phillis's attraction to Holdsworth is borne of his capacity to enlighten her mind and expand her knowledge long before it ventures into sexual attraction. He 'directed her studies into new paths, he patiently drew out the expression of many of her thoughts, and perplexities, and unformed theories' (p. 204), and it is this attention to the growth of her mind and interest in her theories that is first most attractive to her. Where Manning failed to see Phillis as a capable and intelligent young woman, Holdsworth nurtures her interests. It is his belief in her as a thinking and intelligent woman that results in Phillis's love of him. It is for this same reason that she is left 'strangely changed' (p. 224) and suffering in his absence when he swiftly leaves for work in Canada. Holdsworth's departure subdues Phillis's growing intellectual enlightenment and newly-found sexuality. She grieves not only for his loss, but also for the fear of losing her future self. For Recchio, Phillis's despair is necessary because it demonstrates that 'life is defined more by misdirection, by failure, and suffering than by simple cumulations of happiness.'[306] Gaskell demonstrates, again, what Billington refers to as her need to make an example of the power of 'leav[ing] it be – half hidden, untouched, an unextraordinary part of life'.[307] Phillis must experience her loss and acutely feel it; experience it and accept it as an 'unextraordinary part of life'.[308] The tumult that has arisen within her as a result of her transition from adolescent to adult remains 'half-hidden' from her family. In this

[306] Ibid., p. 47.
[307] Billington, *Faithful Realism*, p. 39.
[308] Ibid.

instance, Phillis's loss and pain are the emotions which Billington suggests must be given space to happen. They must not be reduced or explained away. Gaskell does not attempt to make any excuses for them. Though Phillis's almost physical change and emotional decline tend towards Gaskell's rooting in Victorian sensation and emotional description, the young woman's alteration represents something more. In her discussion of the novella, Linda Hughes suggests that Phillis's intellectual and sexual awakening means that 'her story can no longer conform to a courtship plot and its predictable closure in marriage.'[309] Certainly, I would argue that Phillis's education in both a literal and an emotional sense, and her near breakdown at its loss, enables Gaskell to demonstrate to her readers the importance for women to forge an identity of their own and even to consider a life outside of marriage and maternity. While Oliphant expresses life in stark and honest terms, Gaskell's at times sensational description of events offers something no less powerful. She provides an 'embedded acceptance' within her writing of radical ideas, an acceptance of female sexuality and sexual awakening, which Gaskell enters into fully and emotionally in order to experience it at its most powerful.[310] Like Oliphant, Gaskell realises that in order for seemingly radical ideas to become part of ordinary, accepted, daily life, they must first be experienced and felt completely. As an author, Gaskell takes the first step in moving towards this acceptance, by not attempting to explain away Phillis's feelings. Instead, she allows Phillis to 'leave it [her emotions] be', and in doing so, Gaskell demonstrates that they are a part of life, and must be recognised as such.[311]

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[309] Linda K Hughes., '*Cousin Phillis*, *Wives and Daughters* and Modernity' in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. Jill L. Matus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 93-94.
[310] Ibid., p. 39.
[311] Billington, *Faithful Realism*, p.39.

Despite Phillis's disappointment in love, Recchio notes that 'the pattern of [her] personal growth is [now] affirmed'.[312]Though the story ends with Phillis declaring that she wants to spend 'a couple of months' (p. 244) with Manning's parents in order to recover from the illness brought on by the shock of Holdsworth's marriage in Canada, it is her final declaration which speaks volumes:

> She blushed a little as she faltered out her wish for change of thought and scene.
> 'Only for a short time, Paul. Then – we will go back to the peace of the old days. I know we shall; I can, and I will!' (p. 244)

Phillis's final statement, though spoken in despair, is a positive one. Despite the apparent anguish and suffering caused by Holdsworth's absence, her admission that she is prepared for a 'change of thought and scene' (p. 244) beyond the boundaries of her home demonstrates that her encounters with him, and the experience that it provided, have changed her profoundly and are representative of her educational and emotional enlightenment. Here, Gaskell emphasises further the importance of what Billington terms as her attention to the 'apparently inconsequential' infused with importance and consequence.[313] It matters that Phillis makes her final declaration that all shall return to 'the peace of the old days' (p. 244). Of course, Gaskell shows that it will not, and most importantly, that it should not. Phillis's emotional and intellectual capabilities have been realised both with her capacity for thought through her encounter with literature and her feelings for Holdsworth. This awakening means she will no longer be content with the 'peace of the old days' (p. 244) because as Hughes argues, 'the old ways no longer suffice for her.'[314] Indeed, Phillis's empty insistence that all will return as it was in the past is replete with the understanding from Phillis herself that she can never again return to her old understanding. This sort of thinking

[312] Recchio, 'A Victorian Version of the Fall', p. 47.
[313] Billington, *Faithful Realism,* p. 74.
[314] Hughes, *Cousin Phillis, Wives and Daughters* and Modernity, pp. 93-94.

is explored by Billington in her discussion of what constitutes coming to terms with reality and finding answers through literature 'without knowing why [these answers are] right'.[315] Billington notes that, 'It is important now only to know what is wrong, what this particular situation is not […] [and to maintain] a faith that this truth creates its own reality, that a truth is never too late.'[316] Indeed, Phillis knows that her final declaration does not signal a longing to return to the old days but rather precisely the opposite. She knows that her final realisation is not a retreat into her unenlightened, pre-educated self, but is instead an agonising fear that such a retreat could be a possibility. Indeed, through the version of Phillis that exists within extended domesticity, Gaskell demonstrates to her readers the possibilities for a new 'reality' which includes education and growth.[317] Cousin Phillis is one of Gaskell's most clear attempts to demonstrate literature's ability to teach its readers. Not only does Phillis herself learn in a literal sense from the acquisition and reading of books, Gaskell uses her story to explore emotional maturity and the roles that sexuality, love, disappointment, and suffering play in day-to-day life. Phillis's transition from adolescent to adult is acutely drawn to demonstrate that while such an awakening is not without its difficulties (because life is not without its difficulties), it is a part of the life of young women and should be experienced, and felt, fully. Gaskell demonstrates that, without emotional understanding and feeling, life is not complete. In order for a young woman to experience life fully, she must experience life in rounded terms; that is with sadness as well as happiness. Importantly, Cousin Phillis enables Gaskell to demonstrate (much like Oliphant) that women should have the opportunity to forge and grow their identity and find personal fulfilment within extended domesticity.

[315] Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?*, p. 44.
[316] Ibid.
[317] Ibid.

An even more subtle representation of female sexuality occurs in Gaskell's depiction of Cynthia Kirpatrick in her final (and incomplete) novel, *Wives and Daughters* (1866). As an educated young woman whose schooling took place in France, Cynthia is a self-aware, intelligent, and confident young woman. Aware of her beauty, like Oliphant's Phoebe Beecham, Cynthia knows how to use her appearance to her advantage and to influence others. The final section of this chapter focusses on Gaskell's later concern to explore sexuality through the representation of a morally ambiguous and worldly young woman who manages to succeed in negotiating the marriage market. Cynthia extends the boundaries of domesticity to forge her own identity as an intelligent and self-possessed young woman.

The Power of Appearance

Of all Gaskell's female characters, Cynthia is the closest to a representation of an early New Woman. In *The Saturday Review* Eliza Lynn Linton expressed concern with the mid nineteenth-century's 'Girl of the Period': an apparently devious figure, too concerned with 'cultivating her appearance' and having 'plenty of fun and luxury', yet in her final novel, Gaskell creates a young woman who not only takes her appearance more seriously than her moral conduct, but who uses her beauty and stylish bearing to her advantage.[318] With a sense of autonomy which was not available to Esther and Ruth, Cynthia demonstrates Gaskell's radicalism by extending the boundaries of the domestic space, using her appearance and awareness of her sexuality to influence the opposite sex. Cynthia is an enterprising young woman in a similar way to Lucilla

[318] Elizabeth Lynn Linton, 'The Girl of the Period and Other Social Essays' (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1883) reprinted from *The Saturday Review*, Vol. 25 (1868), p. 3
Downloaded from www.gutenberg.org/files/41735-h/41735-h.htm [accessed on 12/2/2018].

Marjoribanks. Like Lucilla, although she does not have a public, working role, Cynthia uses the domestic space to her advantage, employing her social skills during parties and visits to forge a new, autonomous role within an extended version of the domestic space. Indeed, it is during these social occasions that Cynthia, like Phoebe Beecham, makes choices over her clothing, selecting dresses which emphasise her beauty. Appearance is an important part of Cynthia's identity, connected closely with the expression of her sexuality. In this analysis, I will explore how Cynthia uses the knowledge of her beauty, and the effect it has on the opposite sex, to her advantage. Much more in control of her sexuality than Esther and Ruth, Cynthia's beauty helps her to 'escap[e] the stultifying company of her mother, and the limited happiness she foresees in a [confined] marriage to Roger.'[319] In other words, Cynthia aims for a life in extended domesticity and even beyond it. She forges an identity which does not fit with the traditional version of domesticity offered by remaining with her mother, or even in a potential marriage with Roger. I would like to look now at a section of the novel which highlights Cynthia's awareness of her appearance and considered clothing choices, and how these choices work to good effect, reflecting her sense of personal autonomy.

Unlike Ruth, whose sartorial decisions were based on necessity rather than choice, Cynthia chooses dresses which highlight her sexuality. Her seemingly effortless ability to appear beautiful is demonstrated when she meets Roger Hamley for the first time:

> Cynthia was standing a little behind Molly when Roger asked for this introduction. She was generally dressed with careless grace. Molly, who was delicate neatness itself, used sometimes to wonder how Cynthia's tumbled gowns, tossed away so untidily, had the art of looking so well and falling in such graceful folds. For instance, the pale lilac muslin gown she wore this evening had been worn many times before, and had looked unfit to wear again

[319] Hughes, *Cousin Phillis*, *Wives and Daughters* and Modernity, pp. 90-107, p. 98.

> until Cynthia put it on. Then the limpness became softness, and the very creases took the lines of beauty […] The grave eyes [Cynthia] […] raised when she had to be presented to Roger had a sort of child-like innocence and wonder about them, which did not quite belong to Cynthia's character. She put on her armour of magic that evening – involuntarily as she always did; but, on the other side, she could not help trying her power on strangers (p. 238)

Here, Cynthia's use of her clothing as her 'armour of magic' (p. 238) reiterates not only that her sartorial selection is a choice, rather than the 'involuntary' action Molly supposes it to be, but also that Cynthia consciously decides to adorn herself in an item of clothing which highlights her beauty. Much like Phoebe who makes the apparently unusual, yet conscious decision of wearing a black dress to a ball, which she says will 'throw me up' (in other words, will accentuate her beauty) Cynthia chooses to wear 'the pale lilac muslin gown [which had been] worn many times before' (p. 238) when meeting Roger for the first time.[320] Like Phoebe, Cynthia knows her lilac gown, too, will 'throw her up', so she selects it to 'try her power' (p. 238) on Roger. I would argue that here, Cynthia's choice of her lilac gown is no coincidence, but suggests instead that the impressive effect it has in 'looking so well' (p. 238) on her makes it a tried and tested success. While meeting Roger is important to Cynthia, it is not for his sake, but rather because she recognises he could be the man to help her to reinforce her place within an extended version of the domestic space, and even begin the forging of an identity away from home and out in the public space. Like Lucilla's and Phoebe's marriages, the man Cynthia eventually decides upon must offer a partnership in which she can function away from the confined domesticity she experiences with her mother. Gaskell's radicalism is demonstrated here through Cynthia's understanding and management of her clothing, appearance, and sexuality which reinforces her desire to remain autonomous. In highlighting her attractiveness, Cynthia makes clear her

[320] Margaret Oliphant, *Phoebe Junior* (London: Virago Press, 2014), p. 19.

sexuality in ways unavailable to Esther and Ruth. Cynthia's 'armour' is meant not only for 'fun and luxury' (though this is important to her), but for carrying out a sort of pseudo-seduction over whichever member of the opposite sex she finds in front of her.[321] Indeed, through Cynthia, Gaskell demonstrates the importance for all women to discover the most suitable man for future partnership and marriage.

Like Patty Hewitt from Oliphant's *The Cuckoo in the Nest,* Cynthia is an enterprising and morally ambiguous young woman aware of the benefits of an attractive appearance and like Patty, Gaskell endows Cynthia with agency over her sexuality. Though Cynthia differs from Patty because, as a barmaid, Patty works in the public space, both women are desirous of an advantageous union which enables them to maintain their autonomy. Cynthia's considered plan to wear her 'armour' when she encounters members of the opposite sex gives her time and opportunity to make the right decision about a potential partner. Through Cynthia's clever manipulation of her appearance, Gaskell demonstrates to her readers the importance she places in female autonomy. She does this by putting the reader in the position of what Billington calls the 'witness – the one who "quietly" thinks the thoughts implicit in a situation.'[322] In the passage above, when Cynthia meets Roger, the action is divided into two parts, with Molly also acting as a 'witness' to Cynthia's 'magic' but in a different way to the reader. While Molly stands in front of Cynthia, ready to make the introduction, she is left wondering how her half-sister maintains such an attractive appearance, despite her usual untidiness and repeat wearing of a tired gown. While Molly is left to wonder, unanswered, the reader is given permission to witness the other half of the scene, the half in which Gaskell's narrator shows Cynthia in action,

[321] Linton, 'The Girl of the Period', p. 3.
[322] Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?,* p. 109.

adorning herself in her 'armour' and lifting her eyes to Roger in a way which 'did not quite belong to her character' (p. 238). The reader becomes the 'witness' to 'the other side' of Cynthia's actions. The side in which she uses her beauty and her sexuality to work her 'magic' while she decides if Roger will make a suitable partner. Just as when Margaret tussles internally with her growing feelings for Thornton, Gaskell provides her readers here with an insight into Cynthia's 'secret inner-li[fe]'.[323] Her awareness of her beauty and sexuality and the very considered and conscious way she projects and controls these things are part of her 'inner' plan to maintain her autonomy and control over the type of future she wants.

In a later passage from the novel, Cynthia's sense of personal autonomy is evidenced again. After accepting a marriage proposal from Roger (who has now left for a trip abroad) she immediately begins to reconsider her position:

> 'Cynthia! you do love him dearly, don't you?
> Cynthia winced a little aside from the penetrating steadiness of those eyes.
> […] 'Don't you think I have given proof of it? But you know I've often told you I've not the gift of loving; I said pretty much the same thing to him […] I never feel carried off my feet by love for any one […]
> 'How I should like to have gone as far as Paris with him,' she exclaimed. 'I suppose it would not have been proper; but how pleasant it would have been. I remember at Boulogne' […] 'how I used to envy the English who were going to Paris […]
> 'Perhaps, after all,' said Cynthia, after a pause of apparent meditation, 'we shall never be married.' […] you see everything seems a dream at present […] Two years! it's a long time; he may change his mind, or I may; or some one else may turn up, and say I'm engaged to him: what should you think of that, Molly? (pp. 376-378)

In a recent article, Billington looks to a scene from the novel in which Mr Gibson reflects on his recent re-marriage. As he thinks, silently, he tries to convince himself he has made the right choice, believing in the good of his new wife, and listing all the reasons why the decision is a positive one for Molly. Suddenly, in the middle of his

[323] Ibid., p. 75.

thoughts, it occurs to him how quiet his daughter has become, and how much her behaviour towards him has changed since the marriage. It brings tears to his eyes to think of how, lately, if she should meet him on the stair, Molly kisses his cheek or hand, clearly unhappy at the apparent loss of her father to a less than ideal stepmother.[324] Billington points out how, 'in a George Eliot, Henry James, or a Thomas Hardy novel, this might have been the moment of revelation or of self-knowledge – the point at which Mr Gibson realises how mistaken he has been in a choice of a second wife […] but this passage toughly resists the tradition of the "key" moment or point of growth.'[325] I select this example in relation to the earlier passage because I feel the comparison between the two highlights Gaskell's radicalism. Mr Gibson manages to avoid the 'key' moment of realisation about the success (or indeed, lack of success) of his new marriage, but Cynthia does not need to avoid the realisation that she has accepted a proposal of marriage from a man she has no intention of marrying. Instead, she embraces the idea, accepting rationally the thought that she or Roger may change their minds before they meet again. Indeed, Cynthia is determined to remain true to her need for a future full of possibility with a partner who can accept her identity and autonomy as an enterprising woman. Not only does she tell Molly that she 'never feel[s] carried off [her] feet with love for any one' (p. 377), she also continues that she 'should like to have gone as far as Paris with [Roger] (p. 378). For Cynthia, actually loving Roger (or indeed, loving any man) is not related to the idea of travelling the world, leaving the confined domesticity of her mother's presence and heading into the public space. For Cynthia, those things are a part of her future identity. In other words, Cynthia's main concern is for her own independence which she does

[324] Josie Billington, 'On Not Concluding: Realist Prose as Practical Reason in Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters'*, *The Gaskell Journal*, Vol. 30, 2016, pp. 23-40, pp. 32-33.
[325] Ibid.

not allow to be hampered by any frivolous acceptance of Roger's proposal. Through Cynthia, Gaskell makes clear how modern women aim for an identity which offers the most freedom and opportunity. While she does not suggest Cynthia is an ideal role model for young women to follow, Gaskell does represent her as an example of a modern woman with modern approaches to sexuality. Though I consider Levine's essay largely in the light of Oliphant's novels, I am reminded of it here, in relation to Cynthia. Desperate to avoid a stagnant existence (and indeed, marriage), she wants a life 'beyond the routine, a life that is […] less rigorously dutiful, that allows for growth and change.'[326] Like Oliphant's, Gaskell's radicalism is demonstrated through Cynthia's determination to live beyond the expectations of the ideal Victorian wife and mother. Instead, like Kirsteen, who leaves behind her father's oppressive version of domesticity in Scotland to travel to London, Cynthia longs to expand her horizons, travelling to 'Paris' and beyond.

As a woman with a knowledge of her sexuality, Cynthia is not punished for her apparently light-hearted approach to the idea that '[Roger] may change his mind, or [she] may' (p. 378) before they are reunited, or to the suggestion that 'some one else may turn up and say I'm engaged to him' (p. 378). Instead, Cynthia is an enterprising woman for whom marriage is not an essential part of her identity. Indeed, Cynthia does not face the same kind of condemnation as Esther and Ruth when her promise to marry Mr Preston is revealed. After borrowing twenty pounds from Preston to buy some clothing when she was sixteen, Cynthia finds herself trapped when he returns to ensure she stands by her promise to marry him as a payment of the debt. When the truth is revealed, Molly agrees to meet Preston in order to return the money and release Cynthia from her bond. Though Cynthia does not take part in an actual

[326] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 233.

sexual act with Preston, her agreement in which she 'seem[s] to imply she sold [herself] for twenty pounds' (p. 463) is similar in language to that of the prostitute, like Esther, or seduced woman, like Ruth. Despite this, Cynthia does not incur the same problems as a sexually knowledgeable female character from an earlier stage of Gaskell's career, rather, it is Molly who faces disapproval and condemnation after she meets Preston to retrieve letters which may implicate Cynthia. When her part in the foolish engagement is revealed, Cynthia does not experience the sadness and shame of Esther and Ruth, rather she is defiant about revealing the truth to Roger:

> 'From my own self he shall never hear it. I do not love him well enough to go through the shame of having to excuse myself, - to reinstate myself in his good opinion. […] I cannot bear to exculpate myself to Roger Hamley. I will not submit to his thinking less of me than he has done, - however foolish his judgment may have been […] And the truth is, I do not love him. I like him, I respect him; but I will not marry him. I have written to tell him so. […] The relief is the one good thing come out of it all. It is such a comfort to feel free again. It wearied me so to think of straining up to his goodness.' (pp. 546-547)

In this passage, Cynthia's statements sound much like Margaret's when she questions herself on believing she has lost Thornton's love. Like Margaret, Cynthia's pauses are filled with 'thought-spaces'.[327] While, during Margaret's 'thought-spaces' she considered the painful reality of having lost Thornton's regard, Cynthia's concerns are quite different.[328] As she admits, truthfully, to not loving Roger, Cynthia's pauses reflect her 'freedom' which she is not willing to forego in place of an unsuitable marriage. Though Esther and Ruth were represented as socially condemned for experiencing sexuality, Cynthia will not face a similar condemnation. She is a woman aware of her selfhood, and unwilling to take part in anything that takes away her freedom.

[327] Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?*, p. 35.
[328] Ibid.

Gaskell endows Cynthia with the ability to not only think for herself, but also to trust her own judgment. The passage is filled with statements that declare her selfhood, and confirm her identity. Radically, through Cynthia, Gaskell demonstrates that a knowledge of sexuality should not mean a woman is condemned. Nor does it suggest that her identity is changed. On the contrary, for Cynthia, the suggestion of being forced into a marriage with Roger reinforces her insistence that she 'will not marry him' because she 'do[es] not love him' (p. 547). Indeed, Cynthia's upbringing, which saw her spend many of her formative years in a French boarding school, means that 'her notion of the feminine role is energetic and self-reliant.'[329] Indeed, her strained relationship with her mother has, in some ways, expanded Cynthia's notion of the type of domestic space she wishes to inhabit, one which is less restrained and more open to opportunity than that which her mother occupies. Cynthia's apparent wilfulness is instead represented by Gaskell as honesty. By the end of the novel, Cynthia has experience of three different men, Roger Hamley, Mr Preston, and her eventual husband, Mr Henderson, yet at no point is she judged by society in the same way as Ruth or Esther. Instead, Cynthia is rewarded with a life away in London, with a husband who, like her, enjoys 'the pursuit of fashion [and, like her, can] make the most of urban […] culture in London'.[330] Cynthia's union is with a man similar to her in taste, who will enjoy a life with her in an extended version of domesticity, away from the cloistered version she experiences with her mother. Far from being condemned, Cynthia is given a new opportunity to start again, and to create her own, extended version of domesticity. In order to ensure this opportunity, Cynthia chooses a husband who will suit her identity and allow her to live it. If she is to avoid the

[329] Stoneman, 'Gaskell, gender, and the family', p. 138.
[330] Hughes, *Cousin Phillis, Wives and Daughters* and Modernity, p. 109.

stultifying version of domesticity she experiences with her mother, she must forego 'the normal conditions of marriage […] a condition of […] being desired and won by aspiring men.' in favour of selecting the best match to suit her identity.[331] Cynthia's potential marriages with Mr Preston and Roger Hamley failed because they fell into this category, with both men desirous of her in different ways. In the end, Cynthia accepts a proposal from a man who she earlier turned down. She makes the decision and is in control. Through Cynthia, Gaskell suggests radically (as does Oliphant with several of her characters) that women could be in control of their own sexuality and of life choices. Unlike Esther and Ruth, punishment or condemnation is not meted out to Cynthia. Rather, Gaskell provides her with determination and agency over her decisions and over her future.

In this chapter, I have shown how Gaskell's novels and short stories represent the evolution of a range of female characters, all of whom experience their sexuality in different ways. Her earlier characters, such as the prostitute, Esther and seduced young women such as Ruth and Lizzie had little autonomy or control over their lives, particularly after their sexual experiences. Gaskell's later characters, such as Margaret, Phillis and Cynthia, were very different, endowed with the ability to make their own decisions and choices and forge their own identities. Indeed, as I have shown, by the end of *North and South*, Margaret comes close to being a business woman with control over her finances. In some respects she foreshadows Oliphant's representation of women in business in her fiction. The next chapter will, through an analysis of six of Oliphant's female characters, demonstrate the importance Oliphant placed in 'female enterprise' and the ways in which women could use an extended form of domesticity to forge careers and even consider identities in the public sphere.

[331] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 240.

Chapter Three

Margaret Oliphant: Creating the Businesswoman

Becoming the Businesswoman

Both Oliphant and Gaskell enjoyed roles as 'businesswomen' within the marketplace as producers of saleable goods in the form of their novels. In this chapter, I will argue that Oliphant (like Gaskell) successfully managed the 'pragmatic negotiation' between her important domestic roles as a mother, sister, aunt, and benefactor alongside her public role as a profitable author.[332] I will build upon my earlier idea that domesticity was as crucial for Oliphant as it was for Gaskell, especially because Oliphant's own domestic life lent valuable experience and inspiration to her work. In a 2009 essay, Elisabeth Jay points to how domesticity was inextricably linked with Oliphant's writing productivity because she wrote most of her novels, reviews, essays, and short stories in rooms within her own home.[333] Oliphant's bedroom acted as her writing sanctuary especially after her husband Frank's death. Crucially, as Jay notes, 'writing was congruent with [Oliphant's] domestic duties', so writing in the home provided her with the opportunity to take care of her family while also conducting her writing career.[334] As a widow, Oliphant was the sole parent of her young children and so, as Jay discusses, she became used to writing at night while her family was asleep and less likely to require her attention.[335] As the children grew older and their time during

[332] Stoneman, 'Gaskell, gender, and the family', pp. 132-133.
[333] Jay, 'A Bed of Her Own: Margaret Oliphant', pp. 49-67.
[334] Ibid., p. 52.
[335] Ibid., p. 60.

the day was taken up with school, Oliphant chose to continue with her night-time writing schedule. Her routine was aided, as Jay argues, by 'the undisturbed enjoyment of a room of her own – her bedroom'.[336] This idea, that Oliphant enjoyed a space, or 'a room of her own', within the family home where she did most of her writing reinforces my argument that Oliphant believed the domestic space offered the opportunity for growth, fulfilment, and personal development. Indeed, both Oliphant and Gaskell demonstrated how important their time spent within their version of extended domesticity was, enabling them not only to take care of their families and keep their daily lives afloat, but also to develop their writing careers. Not only did Gaskell and Oliphant write about the possibilities offered to women who extended their domestic spaces to suit their needs, they themselves made the most of its opportunities for creativity and the propagation of their careers. It is not surprising then, that Jay should find Oliphant discussing 'the appeal of the library' in several of her novels as a refuge for 'reflection and writing [even] more than as a collection of books or access to knowledge.'[337] Indeed, I would argue that the library's role, (and this could be a private library within the home, or within the more public space of a circulating library or mechanics institute library, such as that used by the Brontë sisters) as an extension of domesticity or privacy is a prominent one for both Oliphant and Gaskell. Not only is it a place where knowledge is literally stored (and indeed where their own novels may reside), it is also an area that offers a space for the type of human thought and personal reflection which Billington discusses.[338] Within the library women can literally read and learn, yet it is also a space where their personal

[336] Ibid.
[337] Ibid., p. 56.
[338] See: Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?*

and emotional education can take shape and thrive. The most important function of the library was the access to reading and to independent thought which it provided.

Though I do not explore Oliphant's triple-decker novel of 1883, *The Ladies Lindores*, in detail in this thesis, I would like to turn, briefly, to an example from the first volume which reinforces Oliphant's exemplifying of the importance of spaces 'of one's own' such as the library, of private, reflective novel reading and understanding, and of the importance of the emotional education which comes from them. In the scene in question, Miss Barbara and her young visitor Nora are discussing 'the box [...] come from the library' that morning which contains the latest novels.[339] Nora has opened the box to 'have a peep' at the books (p. 155) one of which is George Eliot's *Middlemarch.* What is most striking about the conversation between the younger and much older woman is that Miss Barbara admits that she does not want to read *Middlemarch* because she does not want to get to the 'secrets of the machinery […] I have but little pleasure in that […] I'm too old to be instructed. If I have not learned my lesson by this time, the more shame to me, my dear' (p. 156). Miss Barbara's reference to 'the secrets of the machinery', or in other words, the workings of real life, is one of the most explicit examples in Oliphant's work of a female character openly discussing a novel's ability to instruct, to offer guidance and even to educate. Indeed, it draws attention to a novel's power to reveal reality in all its glory and misery. I would argue that this demonstrates again Oliphant's ability to be 'clear-eyed [and] unsentimental [about] emotional complexities' as she plainly states the importance of how the novel shows what is 'true to nature' (p. 157).[340] Though *Middlemarch* is the work of George Eliot her contemporary (and in some ways, her literary rival), Oliphant

[339] Margaret Oliphant, *The Ladies Lindores*: Volume One (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1883), p. 155. Further references will be made in the body of the text.
[340] Levine, 'Reading Margaret Oliphant', p. 233.

recognises its success as a realist novel, one which reveals human nature and its many complexities. Oliphant manages to 'come closer, (even than George Eliot in this respect), to fulfilling […] Eliot's […] ideal of complete but compelling attention to ordinariness in all of its unheroic banality'.[341] It is from this 'ordinariness' that Oliphant (and in many ways, Gaskell) demonstrates her radicalism and begins her education of her readers. Through their novels Oliphant and Gaskell offer up examples of young female characters whose life situations may be recognised by their female readers and may help them make decisions about their own lives as a result.

Because Oliphant was able, simultaneously, to be a businesswoman and a wife and mother, she blurred the boundaries between the public and the private spaces. Her role between both spaces meant that she challenged conventional definitions of domesticity in her own life and in her fiction. Like Gaskell's, Oliphant's novels contain female characters whose domestic lives did not always fit into the conventional mould of marriage and maternity. Instead, like Gaskell, Oliphant's radicalism emerged from her expansion of the domestic space to include women who, either in addition to living within a marriage and having children, or independent of these, sought out a career and even a 'public' existence, much like she herself enjoyed. Through her novels and short stories, Oliphant demonstrated the possibilities the extended domestic space offered for 'female enterprise'. This 'enterprise' was crucial because it represented the opportunities available for personal growth, fulfilment, and education in women's lives. 'Female enterprise' in the context of my argument includes not only Oliphant's female characters who entered into the more public world of work, such as Kirsteen Douglas from *Kirsteen* and Catherine Vernon from *Hester* (although their entry into the public space is also a crucial part of my argument which

[341] Ibid.

I will explore within this chapter) but also those who existed within extended domesticity; that is it to say they functioned largely at the boundary of the domestic space, but also on the periphery of the public sphere. Oliphant created female characters who were enterprising in unique ways and who utilised their domestic roles to their advantage in order to forge their own identities. This means that those women who did not have an active 'career' in the public realm, such as Phoebe Beecham from *Phoebe, Junior* and Lucilla Marjoribanks from *Miss Marjoribanks,* used the opportunities offered by domesticity to be enterprising in different ways. Indeed, for Oliphant, female enterprise was one way for young women to begin the development of their identities. This personal development was necessary whether women had domestic roles or even careers out in the public sphere. The importance of women's growth and understanding was mirrored by Oliphant's contemporary and fellow female novelist, Dinah Mulock Craik, who was an advocate for women becoming interested and involved in business and finance matters, whether or not they had an active career. In her 1886 essay, 'About Money', Mulock Craik outlines what she sees as the importance of women (and girls) being given business knowledge from a young age so that they may learn how to support themselves financially. Along with her encouragement of women to take charge of their own financial affairs, Mulock Craik also discusses the beneficial effects within marriage and work for those women who do not want to rely wholly on men for monetary management and advice. According to Mulock Craik, it was 'necessary' that each woman should be:

> a woman of business. From the day when her baby fingers begin to handle pence and shillings, and her infant mind is roused to laudable ambition by […] the income of 3d-per-week, she ought to be taught the true value and wise expenditure of money. [342]

[342] Dinah Mulock Craik, 'About Money', *The Contemporary Review*, Vol. 50, (1886), pp. 364-372, p. 366.

Like Oliphant, Mulock Craik believed in the importance of women becoming not only knowledgeable about their own finances but also active participants in the organisation and running of their lives, whether they were single or married, or whether they managed the domestic space or embarked upon a career. Mulock Craik resembled Oliphant in that she reiterated women's potential for advancement when they became involved in business enterprise, demonstrating that women could manage their affairs just as well as their male contemporaries.

To explore further the idea of the enterprising female, I will engage with Williams Elliott, and her discussion of the Victorian social sphere, particularly in relation to the woman visitor, and Longmuir's exploration of the female consumer who blurs the boundaries between the public and private spaces. Along with the critical approaches of Williams Elliott, Longmuir, and Stoneman, this chapter will engage also with several scholars whose recent work considers Oliphant's representation of women's lives and the ways in which she explored women's roles within the domestic space. In 'Taking Oliphant Seriously*: A Country Gentleman and His Family*', George Levine looks to Oliphant's location between conventionality and unconventionality; a tension, I will argue, which is reflected not only within her own life but in her literature, also.[343] Significantly, Levine suggests that Oliphant is interested in 'the desperate need of women […] for a life beyond the routine […] a life that allows for growth and change' and that this need is associated directly with her 'subversive' recognition of the limits of marriage and motherhood.[344] Far from being conventional in her opinions of women's lives, (as her erroneous reputation as an anti-

[343]Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', pp. 253-258.
[344] Ibid., p. 233; p. 234.

feminist would suggest), Oliphant offers a non-judgmental representation and recognition of 'the terrible dissatisfactions that often emerge from […] wifedom and motherhood'.[345] Oliphant's subtle recognition of the potential that exists for women to feel unfulfilled despite having what society presents as an ideal, that is a marriage and family, is, I will argue, crucial to her representation and extension of the domestic space within her writing. By extending the domestic sphere so that it becomes a space for personal fulfilment, growth and education, Oliphant provides examples of women who achieve the 'growth and change' her fiction subtly illustrates.[346] Levine suggests that Oliphant's novels, particularly her later ones, sit as comfortably with the modernists as they do with the mid-century realist writers precisely because they 'put to the most serious question' issues such as marriage and motherhood.[347] I agree with Levine that the novels can be read as modernist, not only because they represent women who have opportunities and choices beyond maternity and marriage (although this is important) but also because they provide examples of women who enjoy domestic lives within an extended domestic situation and even combine a domestic career with the world of female enterprise, moving women towards the public space.

The importance of female enterprise is explored in Katherine Mullin's book *Working Girls*, an examination of late nineteenth and early twentieth century representations of working women in the fiction of this period. Mullin discusses Oliphant's radicalism via her provision of 'alternative feminist prototypes' in what she calls her 'explosion of gender roles'.[348] Using as her primary example Oliphant's novel of 1892, *The Cuckoo in the Nest* (although Mullin's ideas could refer to many of Oliphant's female characters), Mullin looks to Oliphant's 'often contradictory

[345] Ibid.
[346] Ibid., p. 233.
[347] Ibid.p. 236.
[348] Mullin, *Working Girls*, p. 211.

attitudes to late-Victorian feminism' which saw her producing female characters who are radically, 'experimental' and even 'sexually equivocal'.[349] Importantly, Mullin explores Oliphant's representation of women who, like *The Cuckoo in the Nest*'s Patty Hewitt, are enterprising in business in order to survive and flourish. Women such as Patty adopt working roles (Patty is a barmaid) which place them on the periphery of the public space, where Oliphant endows them with the agency to be in control of their own minds, sensibilities, and even (as Gaskell does, radically, with many of her female characters) sexuality. This agency, according to Mullin, is represented by Oliphant as having originated with 'transformative knowledge from […] reading'.[350] The idea that, for Oliphant, reading novels was a path to knowledge and understanding is also reiterated by Jay who notes how Oliphant often stated 'her belief that many girls received their knowledge of human behaviour from fiction' and as a result she felt that authors had a 'certain educational responsibility' regarding their negotiation of life matters.[351] Indeed, central to my argument is the idea that both Oliphant and Gaskell designed their fiction to teach their young female readers by means of their representations of life experiences which, as Billington suggests, could provide an all-important space for a human level of thought and reflection.[352] I will engage with Mullin's and Billington's arguments in this chapter to show how, within their novels, Oliphant, like Gaskell, represented reading as a crucial tool in 'enhancing, rather than diminishing, women's agency' until her readers became 'shrewd literary consumer[s], well able to use [their] reading proactively'.[353] It is this proactive ability, that is to say the ability to use what they have learned, and indeed, as Billington suggests, felt, while

[349] Ibid.
[350] Ibid., p. 227.
[351] Elisabeth Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: A Fiction to Herself* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 114.
[352] See: Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?*
[353] Mullin, *Working Girls*, p. 227.

reading that I will argue Oliphant and Gaskell were keen to pass on to their readers through the examples they provided. Both authors intended their writing to initiate an education process that begins with the readers themselves and can be more powerful than many other conventional forms of education as a result. To do this, they provide examples of female characters who use reading as a tool for their own growth, education, and fulfilment.

In her exploration of Oliphant's lifelong relationship with the publishing house, *Blackwood's*, Joanne Shattock looks to how Oliphant (like Gaskell) negotiated her own role in the marketplace as a successful author. No stranger to female enterprise, Oliphant largely enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship with *Blackwood's*, which was based, as Shattock points out, on Oliphant's 'genuine friendship' with the head of the company, John Blackwood.[354] Indeed, because the relationship was not based solely on business, Oliphant received 'financial assistance' from Blackwood after the death of her husband, Frank.[355] He also allowed her to 'have her head', encouraging her reviewing of books and allowing her some freedoms over which contemporary novels she reviewed.[356] In return for these freedoms, Blackwood used Oliphant's reviewing skill to 'unashamedly […] promote Blackwood's authors'.[357] Oliphant would ensure she 'respected Blackwood's prejudices', which meant avoiding writers whom her publisher did not favour.[358] These included Robert Browning, Thomas Carlyle, and John Stuart Mill. In this chapter, I will engage with Shattock's discussion in order to explore how Oliphant's 'public' authorial persona

[354] Joanne Shattock, 'Margaret Oliphant and the Changing House of Blackwood' in *Studies in Victorian and Modern Literature: A Tribute to John Sutherland* ed. William Baker, (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), pp. 51-60, p. 52.
[355] Ibid., p. 53.
[356] Ibid., p. 52.
[357] Ibid., p. 54.
[358] Ibid.

(and indeed, her views and opinions) was affected and influenced by her allegiance to *Blackwood's*. While it is true that both Gaskell and Oliphant made financial gains from their writing, Gaskell, whose husband received a salary as a Unitarian minister, could afford to be more relaxed about working for money than Oliphant, using her earnings to enable a high standard of living. As the sole breadwinner of her family, Oliphant's income from writing had to support her children and many dependents. As a result, she was mindful of ensuring that Blackwood was content with not only what she wrote, but also who she was writing about. Within the chapter, I will engage with Shattock's ideas to explore how Oliphant's role in the world of marketable writing and the publishing business reflected on her representation of several of her female characters, such as Catherine Vernon and Kirsteen Douglas who both enjoyed working roles and forged enterprising identities, extending conventional ideas of domesticity and even moving completely beyond it.

An ambiguous 'anti-feminist'

As I have already suggested, particularly in relation to her famous response to Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, as well as in her essays 'The Condition of Women' and 'The Grievances of Women', Oliphant's personal stance on the growing nineteenth-century women's movement towards equality often appeared ambiguous and even anti-feminist. Published in 1858 in *Blackwood's Magazine*, 'The Condition of Women' looks to the role of women in mid-nineteenth-century society. In the essay, Oliphant appears to deny that women require special consideration, suggesting that they should not be treated as 'a distinct creation [but rather] as a portion of a general

race'.[359] Declaring equality as 'the mightiest of humbugs', she states that 'there is no such thing in existence […] [because] God has ordained visibly […] one kind of sphere and work for a man and another for a woman.'[360] She continues by exploring the distinctions between male and female education, and rights in marriage and divorce, concluding that 'All the greater questions of existence are common to men and women alike.'[361] Published twenty-two years later in *Fraser's Magazine*, in 'The Grievances of Women' Oliphant turns her attention to the growing question of women's suffrage. Arguing as she did in 'The Condition of Women' that discerning the individuality of men and women is more important than campaigning for equality, she states that she 'do[es] not want even to prove that women are equal to men […] I only know individuals, of no two of whom could I say that I think they are entirely equal.'[362] Looking to the importance of work, Oliphant notes that 'fundamental of all the grievances of women' is the lack of acknowledgment they receive in carrying out important 'women's work' such as managing a home and family, which takes up the majority of their time.[363] She concludes by suggesting that the relationship, even in marriage, between men and women will always be unequal because a woman's work is 'undervalued by men in general, because it is done by women' and this is 'too large a subject to be touched by any kind of legislation.'[364] The reference to the undervaluing of women's work is, of course, a feminist statement which actually asserts the high value of women's day-to-day achievements.

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[359] Oliphant, 'The Condition of Women', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. 83, (1858), pp. 139-154, p. 146 in *The Selected Works of Margaret Oliphant, Vol. One*, ed. Joanne Shattock (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), p. 165.
[360] Ibid.
[361] Ibid.
[362] Margaret Oliphant, 'The Grievances of Women', *Fraser's Magazine,* Vol. 101 (1880), pp. 698-710., p. 671 in *The Selected Works of Margaret Oliphant, Vol. Three*, ed. Valerie Sanders (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011) p. 220.
[363] Ibid.
[364] Ibid.

Despite the anti-feminist label which has persistently been attached to her, as I have argued, Oliphant's representation of women in her fiction, her desire to educate her young female readers, her running of her personal family life, her concern about the undervaluing of women's work, and her successful career, all point to a woman who was anything but anti-feminist. Instead, like Gaskell, Oliphant was radical in her approach to extending the domestic space to accommodate all women, including those who did not fit into the mould of marriage and maternity. Through the examples in her fiction, and the adoption of extended domestic roles and spaces, she demonstrated that personal fulfilment and even a career were possible achievements in women's lives. Not only did Oliphant reveal this through her female characters, she demonstrated it also through her own life and career. In his 2014 essay, 'Reading Margaret Oliphant' Levine also discusses Oliphant's undeserved reputation as an anti-feminist. By pointing out that 'her treatment of women is far richer than her ostensible resistance to feminism might suggest', Levine looks to Oliphant's ability to break through traditional and conventional understandings of 'the great Victorian subjects [of] family, motherhood, marriage and money'.[365] By using her fiction to question and explore these 'great subjects', Oliphant demonstrates further her willingness to admit that marriage and motherhood may not provide complete fulfilment in women's lives (an idea that is in direct opposition with an apparent anti-feminist stance). Perhaps even more importantly than this, she allows these admissions to be gradually revealed to her readers through her novels' demonstration of women whose domestic lives involve more than children and a husband. At every opportunity, as I have argued (and this is equally as true for Gaskell), Oliphant uses her writing to educate her readers, though this education can be as subtle as it is revelatory. That is to say that Oliphant's

[365] Levine, 'Reading Margaret Oliphant', p. 233.

examples of women's situations are there for her readers themselves to discover and evaluate. She offers up enterprising female characters who use the domestic space to operate within and to forge their own identities. Through these examples, her readers are enabled to increase their own understanding and abilities to read 'proactively'.[366] As I have argued earlier, neither Oliphant nor Gaskell prescribe solutions to the problems their female readers were likely to encounter. Instead, they function from a non-intrusive space which is reflected in Billington's exploration of literature's ability to increase its reader's powers of listening and understanding. Oliphant allows her readers to find 'the hidden content' within her work (in other words, the possibilities available for women within an extended domestic space and indeed the women who enjoy lives within it) by becoming a 'listened-for voice', a trusted font of advice, which proffers understanding and examples if her readers choose to follow them.[367] Oliphant's role as a novelist is particularly significant because, as Billington notes in her discussion of the 'thought-space' the novelist inhabits, her job enables her to make a point subtly, or provide an example and allow the reader to come to their own conclusions and develop their own thoughts.[368] I would argue that it is Oliphant's own experiences as a wife, mother and enterprising woman writer that see her offering 'the lived experience of the individual' through her literature.[369] Her fiction is an important tool for passing on information about life experiences and, as Billington argues, the purpose of 'literary thinking' is to 'recogni[se] and refin[e] what humans need'.[370] I would argue, then, that Oliphant is far from an anti-feminist because her novels and short stories demonstrate that she is willing to show her female readers, through the

[366] Mullin, *Working Girls*, p. 227.
[367] Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?*, p. 65.
[368] Ibid., p. 103.
[369] Ibid., p. 69.
[370] Ibid., p. 61.

examples offered by her female characters (and indeed, in her own life as delineated in her *Autobiography*) not only what women need, but also what they are capable of achieving in their own lives.

Creating an independent sphere

In her novel of 1865, *Miss Marjoribanks*, Oliphant began her exploration of female enterprise. Lucilla Marjoribanks is a young, ambitious woman, who returns to her home in Carlingford to take care of her father after her mother's death. On her return, Lucilla wastes no time in making a name for herself within the town, primarily through inviting the local community to her lunches which double as social events, and her Thursday night gatherings which aim to bring together the great and the good of Carlingford society. Full of self-assurance and confidence, Lucilla is a match not only for the town's other women, but also for its men as she negotiates a new role arranging the political life of the community and an identity as an important figure in the town, all of which is managed within the domestic space of her father's home. I will argue here that Oliphant's radical voice can be heard loudly through Lucilla, because she represents a young woman who lives in, and manages, the expanded boundaries of domesticity. Though Lucilla does not have a career in the conventional sense, she is highly enterprising, using her social skills to forge a new role which allows, as Levine argues, 'a life beyond the routine […] a life of growth and change.'[371]

Early in the novel, Oliphant makes it clear that Lucilla's self-assurance and knowledge have their roots in her reading. Considering returning to Carlingford, Lucilla thinks of high-society novels and how she 'knew […] that there was a great

[371] George Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 233.

difference between the […] society of London, or of Paris, which appears in books, where women have […] the best of it, and can rule in their own right; and even the […] best society of […] town.'[372] Though, importantly, Lucilla learns from the books she reads, her viewpoint on the 'great difference' between women's roles in the big cities and those they can undertake in small provincial towns demonstrates how inaccurately women's lives are represented within high-society novels. Through Lucilla's recognition of the unrealistic examples of society she encounters in more sensational books, Oliphant reiterates the importance of the realist novel in providing her readers with a more balanced and pragmatic view of women's life situations. Indeed, Lucilla's ideas about the possibilities for women begin to suggest that she is not a wholly naïve young woman. Instead, her musings about 'women [who] […] can rule in their own right' (p. 15) suggests, from the outset, that her understanding of domesticity extends beyond traditional ideas of becoming a subordinate wife in the home and opens up an arena where women can become enterprising and expand their view of what their domestic role is, even in a marriage. In his discussion of Oliphant's novel, *A Country Gentleman and his Family*, Levine states that 'however sacred the bond of marriage [in the novel] […] Oliphant registers everywhere its inadequacy […] [because it] simply fails to satisfy the hopes and fulfil the potentialities of women.'[373] The knowledge Lucilla obtains from her reading allows her to avoid making a future 'inadequate' marriage by providing her with the necessary tools to ensure she fulfils her potential. Like Patty Hewitt's, Lucilla's reading is 'proactive', enabling her not only to learn from what she reads, but to put that reading into practice.[374]

[372] Margaret Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks*, (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 15. All further references will be made in the body of the text.
[373] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 241.
[374] Mullin, *Working Girls*, p. 227.

Lucilla's entry into an extension of domesticity, (which confirms her position as an enterprising young woman) happens when she begins what she terms as 'her campaign' (p. 77). This campaign takes the form of a series of evening gatherings in her father, Dr. Marjoribanks's, home, where Lucilla aims to 'revolutionise society in Carlingford' (p. 14). The term 'campaign' (and, indeed the idea of Lucilla's 'revolution') is crucial to understanding how she views her gatherings. It is no coincidence that Oliphant selected a term loaded with military connotations, and one which is suited much more to the public world than the domestic space. Though Lucilla's gatherings take place in the domestic space of her home, they demonstrate her role as a leader and as an organiser. They enable her to unite different areas of the community, both men and women in her drawing room, extending a usually private space into more of a public one. This extension of the domestic space reiterates Oliphant's radicalism. Though Lucilla may be conducting her evenings from the domestic environment, she is blurring the boundaries between the public and the private spaces. Her careful 'campaign' planning turns an evening of entertainment into something altogether more significant, enabling her to infiltrate the space classed as professional and therefore, public. In Williams Elliott's discussion of what she names the 'social sphere' (a term she defines as a space which falls between the domestic and the public spaces, belonging primarily to the woman visitor who is able to mediate between classes outside of her home, but who is not threatening to men because she does not impinge upon the professional world), she notes that 'although the domestic ideology that promoted the privatized and feminized home as a separate sphere and a refuge from the hostile and public world of men was accepted as natural […] neither [....] sphere was as unified or discrete as it seemed.'[375] I would argue that, in opening

[375] Williams Elliott, 'The Female Visitor', p. 26.

her home to the 'public world of men', (which she does when she invites such people as 'Colonel Chiley and Mr Centum, and several other of the leading people of Carlingford' to her gatherings (p. 80)) Lucilla demonstrates the possibilities for extending the domestic space so that it becomes something other than a feminized refuge away from male hostility. Her enterprising role within extended domesticity shows that the domestic can be a place from which women broaden their horizons. Instead of being a refuge in the sense of an escape from danger, the domestic space can become a refuge in which personal cultivation can take place, where women can learn, grow, and forge their own identities. Oliphant's radicalism is demonstrated because, through Lucilla's blurring of the boundaries between the public and private spaces, she shows that the domestic space can be a refuge designed for women which allows them the crucial 'room of their own' to think and to grow emotionally and intellectually. Oliphant stresses that this type of room is important to women whether they are single or in a marriage, because it helps to avoid what Levine terms as 'the basic imbalance of marriage [of] the wordly-wise man seeking refuge in innocence and subservience.'[376] If a woman is given room, like Lucilla, to cultivate her identity and her intellect, then any imbalances between partners can be alleviated. Indeed, Oliphant suggests that a woman, too, can be as 'worldly-wise' as a man and, if she chooses to marry, she can select a partner who matches her in intellect, rather than languishing in 'subservience' to a potential husband.[377]

Lucilla's attitudes towards her powers of female influence complicate the nineteenth-century view of the woman (chiefly in their roles as wives and mothers) whose primary task it was to use their feminine influence to 'promote morality and

[376] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', pp. 250-251.
[377] Ibid.

domestic happiness'.[378] In a conversation between Lucilla, Mrs Centum and Mrs Woodburn, Lucilla confesses 'that she did her best to please *Them* [i.e. the men who attend her gatherings]. 'For you know […] in Carlingford, one is obliged to take them into consideration. […] so many of you poor [….] people have to go where they like, and see [who] they want you to see' (p. 105). Crucially, Lucilla is a single woman speaking to her two married friends who admit that she has 'an influence over 'The Gentleman' of Carlingford (p. 105), but for Lucilla, this influence is used to offer respite to her married female guests who are often at the behest of their husbands to 'go where they like, and see [who] they want you to see' (p. 105). While it may be argued that Lucilla's influence is limited because it is based within the domestic space of her home, I would suggest that it is precisely because of this that it is important. Through Lucilla's acknowledgment of married women who are obliged to attend functions and meet people of their husbands' choosing, Oliphant highlights to her readers the unfair balance of power that can exist within marriage. Lucilla is different because she shows the possibilities for being a woman who 'rules in [her] own right' by broadening the horizons of her domestic space. (p. 15). Like *The Cuckoo in the Nest*'s Patty Hewitt who, as Mullin notes is a 'shrewd' and enterprising woman, so is Lucilla.[379] She knows 'just as well as [Mrs Centum and Mrs Woodburn do] that but for Dr Marjoribanks's dinners, their selfish mates would find infinite objections to [Lucilla's] Thursday evening' (pp. 105-6). Oliphant endows Lucilla (again, much like Patty) with a straightforward and unsentimental knowledge (which echoes Oliphant's own 'novelistic voice; strong, direct, unsentimental') about how her male counterparts view her gatherings.[380] Yet whatever they may feel their attendance at the party means

[378] Williams Elliott, 'The Female Visitor', p. 38.
[379] Mullin, *Working Girls*, p. 210.
[380] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 235.

Lucilla has succeeded in bringing the public space into her domestic setting. Lucilla is not a naïve young woman, rather she is educated and astute. Through her astuteness and her enterprising mind, Oliphant demonstrates the possibilities for women, whether married or not, to create an identity that is separate from a husband and has the potential to move beyond the domestic sphere.

Indeed, I would argue that Oliphant suggests that the cultivation of a separate identity is crucial not just for a successful marriage, but for a marriage that is successful on equal terms. This idea is evidenced by Levine who, in his discussion about Oliphant's stance on marriage in *A Country Gentleman and his Family*, looks to the novel's examples of relationships, and the reasons why they represent 'the failure of the institution of marriage'.[381] Theo's and Lady Markland's marriage does not work because of their conflicting personalities. While he is immature, selfish, and demanding, she is older, more experienced, and not able to reconcile her love for Theo with that of her young son, Geoff. The marriages of Theo's sisters, Chatty and Minnie, though apparently more successful, work only because, as Levine tells us, 'Chatty […] has no will of her own except the will to be loyal to her husband, and because Minnie uses her reverend husband's position to affirm her deadening moral judgments.'[382] Even the widowed Mrs Warrender, Theo's, Chatty's and Minnie's mother, endures an unsatisfactory marriage, with her needs and preferences ignored by her husband. As Margarete Rubik asserts in her exploration of how several of Oliphant's female characters deal with death, when her husband dies, Mrs Warrender 'is not a distraught widow […] but looks forward to her regained liberty after long years of a dull marriage.'[383] In all of these marriages, Oliphant demonstrates the near impossibility of

[381] Ibid., p. 241.
[382] Ibid.
[383] Rubik, *The Novels of Mrs Oliphant*, p. 272.

a successful union without the cultivation of separate identities and interests. Even the two marriages which are marginally more effective, that of Chatty's and Minnie's, function only in a form of stasis, with Chatty acquiescing to her husband's wishes, and Minnie using her husband's role to affirm her judgments. Through Lucilla's character, Oliphant demonstrates the necessity for women to forge their own identities outside of marriage, so that, should they choose to marry, they will enter the partnership with their own ideas and beliefs, ideas and beliefs which will be equally as valid should they choose to remain single. As Levine suggests, Oliphant's novels frequently highlight for women the dangers and the stultifying effects of an unequal marriage.

Indeed, Oliphant's radicalism and Lucilla's placement within extended domesticity is demonstrated dramatically through Lucilla's move into the world of politics. Her assistance in helping Mr Ashburton succeed in becoming the newest Member of Parliament for Carlingford suggests more about her personal 'campaign' than it does Ashburton's political one. Though Ashburton eventually wins the position of MP, and attempts to propose marriage to Lucilla, Oliphant dramatically shifts away from convention when Lucilla's daydream about what it would be like to marry Ashburton becomes more like a fantasy about stepping into a political role herself. While she waits for his impending proposal, Lucilla 'could not conceal from herself that it was in her power […] to reap all the advantages of the election, and to step at once into the only position which she had ever felt might be superior to her own […]' (p. 462). Like Patty Hewitt, who as Mullin argues, 'fans Gervase's bar-room ardour into a proposal' and in doing so, manipulates him into a marriage that is predominantly more beneficial to her than to him, Lucilla mentally transforms Ashburton's proposal of marriage into an imagined political career.[384] Though she deemed him 'the best man

[384] Mullin, *Working Girls*, p. 210.

– the only man – for Carlingford' (p. 467), she imagines herself taking on the role as a 'great testimonial of female merit […] laid at her feet' (p. 462). Her eventual rejection of Ashburton is fated because he fails to see that her admiration of him exists primarily on a professional level. In this section of the novel, Oliphant's radicalism is undoubtedly at play. She suggests the 'unthinkable' in the context of Victorian society: that a woman could one day enter Parliament. Indeed, Lucilla's rejection of a marriage proposal to the 'Member for Carlingford' (p. 462) is chiefly because her interest in Ashburton was never romantic but was reflective more of her own abilities than of his. Not simply a rejection of a proposal, it demonstrated chiefly Lucilla's need to be a 'woman who can rule in her own right' (p. 15). Indeed, Lucilla remains in the domestic sphere, but hers is a domesticity not limited, but extended. Her role (though, initially, temporary) in the very public world of politics reinforces Oliphant's representation of extended domesticity and enables her to show her readers the possibilities this space offers for personal growth and ambition. Lucilla's eventual acceptance of a marriage proposal from her cousin, Tom (who had previously left Carlingford for India after Lucilla refused to accept his love for her), offers a different prospect than if she had accepted Ashburton. Marrying him would result in a narrowing of her extended domestic space into one which would reflect his political standing rather than her ambition.

In accepting Tom's proposal, Lucilla enters into an enterprising marriage which does not force her to 'place her fate in her husband's hands', but instead offers a partnership based not only on love but also on mutual benefit.[385] Williams argues that 'marriage will not alter the fact that [Lucilla] wants and needs an active life'.[386] This

[385] Rubik, *The Novels of Mrs Oliphant*, p. 121.
[386] Williams, *Margaret Oliphant: A Critical Biography*, p. 84.

is evidenced when she encourages Tom to 'take all our money and realise it, you know whatever that means, and go off directly, and as fast as the train can carry you, and buy an Estate.' (p. 483). Not only has she thought of the idea, Lucilla has started to put the planning into motion, taking pains to 'mark it' [the Estate advert] (p. 483) for Tom in the newspaper. She openly tells him 'it is Marchbank that I want you to buy […] If [papa] had been spared […] I know he would have bought it himself […] and he would have given it to me.' (p. 484). Though Lucilla needs Tom to 'carry out what [her] more original genius suggested' (p. 485) and make the purchase, it is she who will have the say in how the Estate is run and managed. Lucilla's and Tom's enterprising marriage is based much more on what Mulock Craik discusses as a 'partnership' which recognises that 'men and women, though different, are equal, and that therefore it [is] desirable to recognise their separate identity, and to make marriage, financially, a partnership with limited liability.'[387] Indeed, much as Mulock Craik suggests, Lucilla's and Tom's marriage is based on the abilities and contributions of both partners. Lucilla's enterprising mind is as crucial to the relationship as Tom's political potential. Indeed, on seeing Tom's potential, Lucilla reverts to her earlier fantasy of a political career, when she imagines Tom, with her advice and assistance, becoming a Member of Parliament. She visualises 'a parish saved, a village reformed, a county reorganised […] and now a larger sphere opened at her feet' (p. 495). Undoubtedly, this move into the world of business and politics marks a new phase for Lucilla in which her role within extended domesticity is writ large. She is 'translated into a new space, where her influence might be of untold advantage' (p. 485). Crucially, (and indeed, covertly), through Lucilla's enterprising mind, Oliphant radically suggests that women could be politicians and businesswomen

[387] Mulock Craik, 'About Money', p. 369.

(I will consider this idea later in the chapter through my exploration of Catherine Vernon and Kirsteen Douglas). Though Lucilla's domestic role cannot be denied, she has expanded her position within the domestic role she was assigned to include her own personal fulfilment and growth. Through her representation of this character, Oliphant emphasises women's capacities for adopting public roles, suggesting that the social taboos against them are irrational and unfair.

Venturing beyond the domestic

Like *Miss Marjoribanks*, Oliphant's novel of 1876, *Phoebe Junior* is replete with examples of Oliphant's radical voice. Its central protagonist is Phoebe Beecham, a young woman who, as Williams argues, 'resembles Miss Marjoribanks in having an iron will behind a prim and proper façade' and whose domestic position moves her even further onto the periphery of the public space than her predecessor.[388] While visiting her shop-keeper grandparents in Carlingford, Phoebe's lady-like appearance and manner instantly make an impression among the local community. Despite her belief that she must lower her expectations to fit in with her down-to-earth extended family, Phoebe soon finds herself involved with the Carlingford locals, becoming embroiled in a marriage plot, and almost implicated in a forgery. While Lucilla's strength lay in her ability to blur the boundaries between the private and public spaces during her evening gatherings, Phoebe ventures into the role of what Williams Elliott terms as the 'woman visitor'.[389] This means that (like Margaret Hale in Gaskell's

[388] Merryn Williams, *Margaret Oliphant: A Critical Biography* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1983), p. 85.
[389] Williams Elliott, 'The Female Visitor', p. 22.

North and South) she ventures outside of the domestic location of her home and into the community. While Lucilla connected the opposing worlds of the private and the public by inviting its inhabitants into her home, Phoebe ventures into both spaces and places herself within them. In this section, I will explore further how Oliphant represented Phoebe's identity as a 'woman visitor', and how she demonstrated an important next step in women's development both inside and outside the home.

As I have argued earlier, both Oliphant and Gaskell wanted to educate their young female readers through their novels and both writers realised the potential novel-reading had for teaching young women. As a result, each authors' novels offer up situations which show women's lives in many forms and allow their readers to decide, and more importantly to identify with their female characters. Billington refers to this kind of revelatory reading as one which offers crucial space for the realisation of human thought and feeling. According to Billington, 'a language to describe subjective experience' is integral if literature is going to teach us anything.[390] This experience is precisely what Oliphant and Gaskell offer: a kind of shared experience which is realised by their readers and which educates them as a result. This radical belief put Oliphant and Gaskell in direct opposition to contemporaries such as Ruskin who suggested that novels do nothing but 'increase the morbid thirst for useless acquaintance with scenes in which we shall never be called upon to act.'[391] Both Oliphant's and Gaskell's radical approaches to their novels demonstrate that the opposite is true and that the situations explored in their work provide a useful 'language' from which their young readers can learn about life and use 'proactively'.[392] This is emphasised clearly through Phoebe, whose enterprising ability

[390] Billington, *Is Literature Healthy*? p. 91.
[391] Ruskin, 'Of Queens' Gardens' in *Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2004), p. 164.
[392] Mullin, *Working Girls*, p. 227.

to understand and negotiate with the people she encounters has been influenced directly by the books she read in her 'girlish days' (p. 141).

Like Lucilla, Phoebe is an intelligent and self-assured young woman whose education through novel reading gives her the upper hand over her male contemporaries such as Clarence Copperhead and even the Oxford-educated Reginald May. Indeed, readers are told from early in the novel that Phoebe 'had every advantage in her education […] she had attended lectures […] and heard a great many eminent men […] She had read, too, a great deal. She was very well got up in the subject of education for women.' (p. 17). It is no coincidence that Oliphant connects Phoebe's 'great deal' of reading with her knowledge of 'education for women'. While Phoebe's schooling has provided her with an education in theoretical ideas which could rival that of her male counterparts, Oliphant suggests that her emotional 'life' education, the education gained from her novel-reading, is the one most useful to her negotiation of day to day life. I will explore this idea in closer detail in this section to explain how Oliphant demonstrates through Phoebe the importance of the knowledge to be gained through novel reading and what acquiring this knowledge might signal for her readers.

While the knowledge Oliphant conveys can relate to conduct and behaviour, it can also work on more practical levels, such as choosing clothing to reflect your identity. Patricia Zakreski, for example, points out how Phoebe's sartorial choices represent the ways in which she is 'mark[ed] […] out as distinct – something more than […] a stylish young lady who follows fashion.'[393] She argues that 'Oliphant represents dress as a means through which the individual can assert independence from the uniformity of prevailing social and aesthetic paradigms.'[394] Indeed, Phoebe's

[393] Patricia Zakreski, 'Fashioning the Domestic Novel: Rewriting Narrative Patterns in Margaret Oliphant's *Phoebe Junior* and *Dress, Journal of Victorian Culture,* Vol. 21 (2016), pp. 56-73, p. 67.
[394] Ibid., pp. 72-73.

decision to wear a black dress for Mr Copperhead's ball which, she argues, will 'throw me up' (p. 19) (in the contemporary sense, this phrase suggests Phoebe's belief that the dress would emphasise her attractiveness) appals her mother who feels black should be worn only by older women. However, Phoebe's choice represents something important. It demonstrates her break with tradition, not only in a fashion sense, but also from the 'uniformity' of what is expected from her as a young woman. Indeed, when Phoebe leaves her home to visit her grandparents in Carlingford, she is denoted as 'the young lady in black' (p. 104) by Ursula and Janey May. As Zakreski argues, Phoebe is marked out as someone 'distinct' from the locals due to her striking choice of dress, but I would suggest that her choice represents something more than this: Phoebe's decision to break with tradition through her clothing choices is in accordance with her move away from the domestic space of her home and into the more public environment of Carlingford during her visit to her grandparents' home. Oliphant makes it clear from early in the novel that Phoebe is an independently-minded young woman who will not fit entirely with expected 'social […] paradigms'.[395] Interestingly, Phoebe's appearance is reminiscent of Ruth Hilton's from Gaskell's *Ruth,* who wears her 'Sunday black silk' when she encounters Bellingham, her seducer, for the first time.[396] Though both young women appear striking in their dresses, they wear them in very different ways. Ruth's dress is her 'Sunday best', worn to appear smartly attired while she works mending dresses at the society ball. Though Ruth's appearance attracts Bellingham's eye, she does not choose the black dress to highlight her attractiveness, rather she chooses it out of necessity, because her employer instructed her to wear the smartest item of clothing she owns.

[395] Ibid.
[396] Gaskell, *Ruth,* p. 12.

Phoebe, on the other hand, selects her dress carefully to capture the attention of onlookers and to appear different to the other girls. While for Ruth, black represented the sobriety (and the necessity) of her 'Sunday best' dress, for Phoebe it represents difference and choice. While Bellingham read sexuality into Ruth's appearance, leading to her seduction, Phoebe's unusual colour choice demonstrates her independence and her move into the public space.

Phoebe's arrival in Carlingford to dutifully visit Mr and Mrs Tozer begins the representation of her positioning between both the domestic and the public spaces. Like Margaret Hale's arrival in Milton, Phoebe has 'emerge[d] from [the] protection' of the domestic space of her London home into the more public environment of provincial Carlingford society. Though she is not completely removed from domesticity while in her grandparents' home, her domestic space has expanded nonetheless from the familiarity of home to a new and unfamiliar town. This is evidenced clearly when, like Margaret, Phoebe finds herself 'walking the streets and speaking directly to people', something which would have been difficult for an unchaperoned young woman to do in London.[397] One of her early meetings with Mr Northcote, a young non-Conformist minister, for example, happens when she is taking a 'solitary walk' (p. 113) through Carlingford. While Lucilla's social interactions tended to take place within her home Phoebe's have expanded beyond this. The conversation she has with Northcote demonstrates her intelligence and her ability to converse on topics from the 'public' (and potentially contentious) space of religion. After a debate about Northcote's role and how his beliefs might fit with a Carlingford congregation, Phoebe openly acknowledges her encroachment onto a 'public' subject. She tells him: 'I know what you are thinking: it is just like a woman to look at a public

[397] Zakreski, 'Fashioning the Domestic Novel', pp. 72-73.

question so. Very well; after all women are half the world, and their opinion is as good as another' (p. 117). I would argue that Phoebe's statement represents clearly Oliphant's radical voice. She makes blatant, through Phoebe, the belief that women are as intelligent as men and as such should express opinions on general matters, including those that belong outside of the boundaries of the domestic. This belief is echoed by Oliphant in her essay 'The Condition of Women' in which she discusses women's position as 'half of humankind'.[398] She repeats it again in her discussion on Mill's *The Subjection of Women* in which she states that 'a woman is a woman, and not a lesser edition of a man […] they are not rivals, nor antagonists. They are two halves of a complete being.'[399] The idea that men and women are equal halves of a whole is stated by Oliphant and reiterated through Phoebe in her bold statement to Northcote. By allowing Phoebe to interact with the young man on a 'public' subject and in the public space of the town, Oliphant is, as Mullin argues, 'explod[ing] traditional gender roles' and society's expectations regarding young women.[400] She reiterates, again, that Phoebe is on the outskirts of expected 'social paradigms'.[401] Like Oliphant, who as Levine notes, is 'conventional and unconventional at the same time', so is Phoebe.[402] She is, undeniably, a young woman from the domestic space, yet simultaneously, she is also educated and enterprising. Her ability to discuss topics that are outside the boundaries of domesticity reiterate that for Oliphant (and for Gaskell), domesticity is a space that could and should be used for broadening the intellectual and emotional education of young women. Phoebe, as a character, is evidence of the

[398] Oliphant, 'The Condition of Women', p. 164.
[399] Margaret Oliphant, 'Mill on *The Subjection of Women', Edinburgh Review,* Vol. 130, (1869), pp. 572-602, p. 580, in *The Selected Works of Margaret Oliphant, Vol. One,* ed. by Joanne Shattock, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), pp. 449-475, p. 459.
[400] Mullin, *Working Girls*, p. 211.
[401] Zakreski, 'Fashioning the Domestic Novel', p. 67.
[402] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 233.

possibilities available to young women to use this education to move into extended domesticity and even beyond it, into a career.

One of the best examples from the novel which exemplifies Phoebe's place as an educated and enterprising young woman, able to negotiate between the public and private spaces, is her involvement in the resolution of a forgery scandal. The trouble occurs when Mr May, father of Phoebe's Carlingford friends Ursula, Janey, and Reginald, finds himself unable to settle a debt and uses Mr Tozer's name on a bill to borrow some money. The gravity of the situation renders Mr May unwell and, on trying to find the cause of his sudden illness, Phoebe discovers a piece of paper which 'contained a corner of a letter, a section of three lines: "must have mistaken the date/presented today/paid by Tozer"' (p. 287). She heads straight to her grandfather in the belief that the situation is easily remedied, only to find him in a meeting with a banker's clerk who informs him that his name has been added, fraudulently, to a bill. Finding herself troubled between her loyalty to her grandfather and to her friends, Phoebe takes it upon herself to resolve the problem and become 'the saviour of the family […] show[ing] them that their kindness had been appreciated' (p. 289).

While visiting the Mays' household, Phoebe is what Williams Elliott discusses as the 'woman visitor' whose domesticity renders her harmless and able to mediate between different classes and areas of society.[403] This means that, despite her mind being 'full of many and somewhat agitating thoughts' (p. 287) because of the suspected knowledge about Mr May's role in the forgery, she carries on helping her friends assist their father without her troubles being revealed. Her role as mediator assists her again when she reaches her grandfather's house, finding him in his late-

[403] Williams Elliott, 'The Woman Visitor', p. 22.

night meeting. Realising the danger of the situation, Phoebe appeals to him to put off his plans to report the forgery until the next morning:

> Tozer turned round and looked at her [Phoebe] eagerly […] his wife's more enlightened observations had made him aware that it was possible that Phoebe might one day have something very interesting to reveal […].
>
> "I'm busy; go away, my dear, go away; I can't talk to you now."
>
> Phoebe gave the visitor a look which perplexed him; but which meant if he could but have read it, an earnest entreaty to him to go away. She said to herself, impatiently, that he would have understood had he been a woman […].
>
> "Grandpapa," she said decisively, "it is too late for business to-night. However urgent it may be, you can't do anything to-night."
>
> […] "I think so too," said the banker's clerk. "I'll come to you in the morning as I go to the Bank." (pp. 291-292)

Phoebe demonstrates clearly her enterprising nature by keeping everything calm in both Mr May's and her grandparents' houses until she learns more about the situation. She is working within the domestic space, but by using her enterprising mind, she considers what next needs to happen to resolve the problem, even venturing into the realm of business by negotiating between her grandfather and the banker's clerk in order to buy herself more time. This scene in the novel is useful particularly because it reinforces Phoebe's identity as an enterprising woman, placed in a situation which is beyond domesticity. Even Tozer, who believes that his granddaughter is 'only a bit of a girl' (p. 292) recognises that 'she might one day have something very interesting to reveal' (p. 291). The ambiguous position Phoebe occupies in her grandfather's eyes between inexperienced young girl and 'interesting' young woman gives her the room, in this situation particularly, to stall him from acting on his knowledge of the forgery. While Tozer, and his visitor, remain unaware of Phoebe's enterprising ability she manipulates the situation to her advantage and manages to keep Mr May's guilt a secret. Phoebe's recognition of how 'a woman' would understand her need to have the clerk 'go away' (p. 291) so she can prevent her grandfather from taking matters further, highlights her ability as a woman to understand both domestic and business

matters in ways a man cannot. The clerk is able only to consider the matter of business at hand, and not Phoebe's secret entreaty to him to leave her grandfather's home so she may divert his attention and calm him down. In other words, not only does Phoebe enter into the public space in her understanding of the forgery and its implications, she also understands what is necessary in the domestic space of her grandfather's home in order to buy herself some more time.

Eventually, deciding to keep the forged bill in her possession, Phoebe heads to Mr Cotsdean's shop, (the man who tormented Mr May until he repaid a debt). In doing so, Phoebe leaves behind the domestic space to venture into the public space of Cotsdean's business. She also decides to negotiate with Cotsdean to rid Mr May of his implication in the crime, telling him that:

> if anyone comes to you about the bill today, don't say anything about *him.* Say you got it - in the way of business – say anything you please, but don't mention *him.* If you will promise me this, I will see that you don't come to any harm. Yes, I will; you may say I am not the sort of person to know about business, and it is quite true. But whoever comes to you remember this – if you don't mention Mr May, I will see you safely through it; do you understand? (p. 304)

Not only has Phoebe ventured into the public space by entering Cotsdean's shop, she even negotiates with him to save Mr May. Though she states that 'you may say I am not the sort of person to know about business' (p. 304), Oliphant reiterates Phoebe's enterprising qualities and the important role her reading has played in providing her with a level of understanding and education which serves her well even in the public space. Tamara S. Wagner argues that Phoebe 'understands the modern debit-credit system better than some of the men around her do […] [which] adds to […] readerly expectations of how a young woman should react to financial pressures'.[404] I would argue that, through Phoebe's understanding of the situation and negotiations with the

[404] Wagner, "'Honour! That's for men'", p. 23.

men involved in the forgery, Oliphant forces readers to confront their misconceptions of young women and their capabilities. Indeed, Phoebe enables Oliphant to demonstrate how irrational is the taboo against women in the public arena. By showing clever and capable young women in the public space, she subtly suggests that women should have full opportunities.

The novel comes to its close with Phoebe, like Lucilla, finding a husband who will offer a mutually beneficial (and advantageous) relationship. Like Tom Marjoribanks, Clarence Copperhead is set for a career in Parliament with Phoebe as his speech-writer. Like Lucilla, Phoebe is going to be a wife who 'can do the business' (p. 327) for the inept Clarence, who acknowledges willingly her intellectual superiority and ability:

> "Phoebe knows I'm fond of her, but that's neither here nor there. Here is the one that can make something of me. I ain't clever, you know it as well as I do – but she is. I don't mind going into parliament, making speeches and that sort of thing, if I've got her to back me up. But without her I'll never do anything, without her you may lock me in a cupboard, as you've often said. Let me have her, and I'll make a figure, and do you credit. I can't say any fairer," said Clarence, taking the rest of her arm into his grasp, and holding her hand. He was stupid – but he was a man, and Phoebe felt proud of him, for the moment at least. (p. 327)

With her husband at the helm of a public career in politics, Phoebe 'does the business' by directing his speeches and therefore, by proxy, the content of his political campaigns and ideas. Levine's suggestion that Oliphant's novels represent frequently women's need 'for a life beyond the routine […] a life that allows for growth and change' is writ large by Phoebe's pairing with Clarence.[405] Their marriage allows Phoebe to exercise her intellectual abilities and demonstrate how useful she would be in a public role of her own. Certainly, their marriage is based not only on an

[405] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 233.

appreciation for one another but, crucially, on a mutually beneficial pact which sees Phoebe assist Clarence's fledgling political career in ways that offer her personal growth and intellectual fulfilment. Like Lucilla, Phoebe's intelligence and determination to avoid a stultifying marriage help her to 'satisfy [her] hopes [and] fulfil [her] potentialities'.[406] Rather than entering into a partnership based solely on domesticity, Phoebe's marriage with Clarence allows her to use her enterprising intellect to affect his political career and, by proxy, his role within the public space. Oliphant's radical voice can be heard loudly through Clarence's insistence that Phoebe will 'make something of me. I ain't clever […] but she is' (p. 327). In a twist which defies convention, Clarence needs Phoebe's enterprising ability to help him forge a public identity and begin his political career. While Oliphant often 'dramatizes with singular insight and precision the psychological oppression of women trapped in conventional arrangements', Phoebe demonstrates the opposite.[407] She is not oppressed or trapped by Clarence. Instead, their marriage plays with convention, with Clarence not only acknowledging Phoebe's superior intellect, but admitting that he will 'never do anything' (p. 327) without her. Again, through Phoebe, Oliphant demonstrates clearly her radical voice by suggesting that it is (and indeed should be) possible for women to enter into a political and public existence. Like Lucilla, Phoebe's intelligence and influence over Clarence's political career demonstrates that women were capable of forging enterprising and successful identities within the public space, and that it was only society's restrictions on women which made them unable to enter parliament and the professions directly.

[406] Ibid., p. 241.
[407] Ibid., p. 234.

A 'woman of business'

In 1883, Oliphant published *Hester*. While Lucilla and Phoebe clearly demonstrated the importance Oliphant placed on female enterprise, and on the domestic as a flexible space for personal fulfilment, her 'feminist prototype' Catherine Vernon ensured there was no mistaking the author's radicalism.[408] Not only does Catherine, an unmarried woman, support single-handedly a large extended family, she is also the head of her family's bank, Vernon's. Indeed, through Catherine, Oliphant provides an example of a woman who fits the description of Mulock Craik's financially capable and knowledgeable ideal female. As the head of the bank, not only does Catherine manage her own finances, she also manages the finances of her customers. No longer 'dependent on her male relations', Catherine has developed an acute 'knowledge of business; bank business referring to cheques, dividends, and so on, and as much of ordinary business as she can.'[409] Like Oliphant (and indeed, Gaskell) Catherine embodies a public identity and a career. She negotiates the private, domestic space of her home and family, while also managing the public space of the bank. While Oliphant demonstrated through her own writing career as well as through her characters Lucilla's and Phoebe's negotiation of their husbands' political campaigns that women were perfectly capable of enjoying a career of their own; indeed, she also made this clear through her depictions of Catherine's running of the bank and her identity as a businesswoman.

Catherine's career begins when she is thrust into the position of saving the family bank from financial ruin brought about by her profligate cousin, John Vernon.

[408] Mullin, *Working Girls*, p. 211.
[409] Mulock Craik, 'About Money', p. 368.

On the death of their grandfather, the bank is bequeathed to both John and Catherine, but she pulls away from its daily running, despite her position as a partner. When it falls into decline and is abandoned by John, Mr Rule, a clerk faithful to the bank since Catherine was a young girl, turns to her in the hope she can save it from ruin. Stepping into the role of the head of the bank, and restoring confidence in it, Catherine rescues the business and makes it a success. In addition to her public role, Catherine financially supports many members of her family in her home, the Vernonry, including her favourite, Edward, and John's wife and daughter, Mrs John and Hester. Her 'unorthodox' family (like the Bensons in Gaskell's *Ruth*) means her negotiation of her domestic space and its inhabitants is complicated.[410] Indeed, the petty jealousies of Catherine's extended family, including Mr Mildmay Vernon and the Miss Vernon-Ridgways are highlighted early in the novel when the narrator suggests shrewdly:

> Few people are capable of misrepresenting goodness in the barefaced way of saying one thing while they believe another. Most commonly they have made out of shreds and patches of observation and dislike, a fictitious figure meriting all their anger and contempt, to which they attach the unloved name. Catherine Vernon, according to their picture of her, was a woman who, being richer than they, helped them all with an ostentatious benevolence, which was her justification for humiliating them whenever she had a chance, and treating them all at times as her inferiors and pensioners (p.58).

Though Catherine's business success means she is financially stable and able to provide homes for members of her family, Oliphant highlights the difficulties she faces in the management of her domestic space and the people within it. Catherine's success as the head of the bank and as a female businesswoman leave her open to the misplaced scorn and contempt of those relatives who choose to see her as an 'ostentatious' (p. 58) benefactor who uses her hard-earned money as a tool to make them seem inferior. Catherine's status as a wealthy woman who exists successfully in both the domestic

[410] Stoneman, 'Gaskell, gender and the family', p. 143.

and the public spaces makes her a target for her jealous family's misinterpretation of her character.

This complicated position enables Oliphant to lay bare what Heilmann discusses as her concern with the ways in which '[women] negotiated between domestic responsibilities and their wish for meaningful work, how they managed to protect their […] female values from the onslaught of private and public demands while at the same time achieving a sense of independence and […] fulfilment.'[411] Certainly, while Catherine is successful in negotiating the business demands of the bank, her judgmental and ungrateful family prove more difficult to appease. As Levine suggests however, despite their ungrateful attitude, '[Catherine] remains unagitated as she continues her generous activities without responding to what she was well aware of – the petty, nasty ingratitude of her dependents.'[412] Unable to fathom or accept a successful professional woman, Catherine's family transforms her into a 'fictitious figure' (p. 58). In their eyes, it is not possible for a woman to balance identities in both the domestic and the public spheres. For them, Catherine's generosity is borne of condescension, not success. This is, of course, not the case. Catherine provides Oliphant with the opportunity to demonstrate an enterprising woman who, (much like she herself did), negotiates a life within the domestic space as well as in the public space. The part of this quotation where this resonates loudest is the point at which the narrator looks to the fictitious version of Catherine, the version that is not real but enables her relatives to feel better about their treatment of her and amplifies their inability to accept her success as an enterprising woman. It is at this point where Oliphant makes use of 'in-between' thought.[413] According to Billington this thought

[411] Ann Heilmann, 'Mrs Grundy's Rebellion: Margaret Oliphant between Orthodoxy and the New Woman', *Women's Writing 6* (1999), pp. 215-37, p. 232.
[412] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously' p. 235.
[413] Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?,* p. 104.

represents the space between the words written on a page, and the readers' own thoughts about what they have read. In other words, 'in-between' thinking gives the reader the chance to become the space between the novelist and their meaning, and forge an understanding about their own personal take, and personal feeling, on the words. For the reader, this extract is filled with opportunities for 'in-between' thinking.[414] Oliphant's narratorial voice steps out of the rest of the narrative, informing her readers that Catherine's relatives have created their own understanding of her personality and have decided what kind of woman she is. Oliphant opens room for thinking space between Catherine's supposedly nasty intentions and the reality of her as a woman trying hard to negotiate her difficult family and manage her business. She leaves space for the reader to question the intolerance and ingratitude of Catherine's relatives and to come to the realisation that their representation of her is a false one. Her occasionally fraught and difficult relationship with her extended family remains true to what Levine terms as Oliphant's 'commitment to the direct and faithful confrontation of ordinary experience'.[415] Indeed, Oliphant does not shy away from confronting Catherine's day-to-day family troubles, but nor does she allow these troubles to prevent her success as an enterprising and successful businesswoman. Instead, Oliphant suggests to her readers the possibilities a woman may face in managing and overcoming domestic difficulties while still thriving within the public space.

Early in the novel, when Catherine has saved the bank and spent several years running it as successfully, if not more so, than her grandfather, the narrator pauses to question whether it is 'genius for business, as distinct as genius for poetry, which

[414] Ibid.
[415] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 233.

makes everything succeed? But this is more than any man can be expected to understand' (p. 22). Oliphant makes the point from the beginning of the novel that Catherine's 'genius' for running the bank is a result of her enterprising and capable nature which can be innate in some women as it is in some men. I would argue that Oliphant reinforces here the idea that hard work, determination and persistence are crucial to success; qualities she herself became used to over the course of her career. Aeron Hunt discusses how 'Catherine's position as the main action of the novel opens blends masculine and feminine: in her life "the work of a successful man of business" is increased yet softened by all the countless nothings that make business for a woman'.[416] It is this duality that Oliphant represents through Catherine; the assimilation of her domestic life with her role as a businesswoman. It is Catherine's (and indeed, Oliphant appears to suggest, many women's) 'genius' to manage successfully a domestic existence which requires as much time and effort as a public role. For Oliphant domesticity could include looking after a husband and children, managing an extended family, or even looking after oneself. Indeed, she suggests, that this management of all roles is 'more than any man [could] be expected to understand' (p. 22) because it would not usually be expected of a man. It is women's ability to manage both domestic and public roles, Oliphant reiterates, which is the true 'genius' and Catherine's role as an enterprising woman makes her more than a 'man of business', she is a woman of business able to cope with both a career and an extended family. The so-called 'countless nothings' of her domestic life are as important to her as her role heading the bank, just as Oliphant's and Gaskell's domestic lives and the raising of their children were as important to them as their writing careers. Through

[416] Aeron Hunt, *Personal Business: Character and Commerce in Victorian Literature and Culture* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2015), p. 161.

Catherine's 'genius', Oliphant teaches her female readers that women could be both 'providers of real capital and […] cultural capital.[417] In other words, they could be productive not only in a business sense, but also in a nurturing, loving sense. Indeed, she shows that female enterprise and career success were possible and could even exist alongside a domestic existence.

Catherine's negotiation and management of her domestic space means she gathers her family together in the White House, known locally as the Vernonry, thereby uniting her private, domestic space with that of the public space of the bank. Known as 'Aunt Catherine to a great many people' (p. 26), she manages to assimilate her familial role with that of 'Catherine Vernon, Head of Vernon's Bank'. Again, Oliphant demonstrates that much like in her own life (and this is equally true of Gaskell), the assimilation of a public and domestic identity was possible and that these identities could go hand in hand. Much like Oliphant and Gaskell, whose publishing success translated into financial gains for their families, so Catherine's achievements in business translate into success for her family. Her position means she is able to offer roles at the bank to others in her family, such as Edward Vernon who she hopes will 'replace her in the bank' (p. 25) when she retires. Jay argues that Catherine's eagerness to help her family makes her an 'honorary male [which] distances her from those she had most wished to help.[418] I would argue that the idea of a woman adopting a pseudo-male role to be successful in her domestic space is one which Oliphant was keen to move away from. Rather, Catherine's eagerness to help and further the careers of those she takes care of represents her enterprising ability as a woman to keep each aspect of her life as successful as the other. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that Catherine's

[417] Patricia E. Johnson, 'Unlimited Liability: Women and Capital in Margaret Oliphant's *Hester*', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 6.1, (2010), pp. 29-43, p. 41.
[418] Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: A Fiction to Herself*, p. 217.

success is problematic for Edward who 'had not been able to divest himself of a certain grudge against the author of his good fortune' (p. 50). Despite her efforts, he cannot reconcile Catherine's role as his guardian within the domestic space with her role as his manager in the public space. The relationship Catherine has with Edward, who despite being her favourite goes on to betray her and almost destroy the bank for a second time, is reminiscent of the relationship Oliphant had with her own sons whose lives were wasted through excessive drinking, gambling, and profligacy despite their mother's best efforts to help them. It was this relationship and its constant struggles which Oliphant 'drew upon to write the quasi-mother-son relationship between Catherine and Edward.'[419] Such honesty in her work, the kind of honesty which has its roots in lived experience, reinforces Oliphant's 'commitment to the direct and faithful confrontation of ordinary experience'.[420] She does not try to steer her readers away from the possibly difficult realities involved in managing both a career, and a domestic existence. Rather, she provides examples of situations and relationships that are trying and even at times troubling, to show her readers the possibilities that exist for overcoming problems and managing successfully in both private and public spaces despite hardship.

Indeed, in Oliphant's personal life, it was her male relatives who were often the most troubling, and in need of her assistance. Her husband Frank, her brothers, and her sons often presented her with trying situations which she had to work hard to resolve. Unsurprisingly, such relationships are reflected frequently through Oliphant's novels. As I have discussed, Phoebe instructs and helps several men during the resolution of the forgery, and both she and Lucilla stage-manage their relationships

[419] Philip Davis and Brian Nellist, 'Introduction' to: Oliphant, *Hester*, pp. viii-xxvi, p. xi.
[420] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 233.

with their unwitting husbands to steer them to success and even a move towards careers of their own. In terms of troubling relationships, Catherine's and Edward's relationship is no exception. Despite the blow Catherine is dealt when she realises the extent of Edward's betrayal (he almost destroys the bank, flees, and then marries a young girl he barely knows), her worst pain comes from the realisation that 'his past life had been a burden, a bondage, a monotony, that freedom was what he longed for – freedom from her!' (p. 411). Much like Oliphant, who experienced suffering at the hands of her sons, so does Catherine experience anguish as a result of Edward's treachery. For both women, however, it is the need to carry on and support everything in the remaining domestic and public spaces which means that though 'the spasm was like death […] it came to an end' (p. 412) and life continues. Catherine immediately returns to action to do 'everything that has to be done' (p. 413) to save her bank as she did many years previously when it was almost destroyed by John. Oliphant demonstrates the female ability to manage and to thrive despite males being disappointing and inadequate. Catherine's situation, here, recalls that of Mrs Warrender's in *A Country Gentleman and his Family*. In the scene in question, Mrs Warrender has lost her husband, and with him 'her home and position as head of an important house.'[421] Though the conventional expectation would likely be of Mrs Warrender's despair and sadness at her loss, Levine points to Oliphant's rejection of the tragic in favour of a 'recognition that Mrs Warrender does not feel what convention assumes she will, nor desire what is thought to be appropriate to a mourning wife and mother.'[422] Like Mrs Warrender, Catherine, too, rejects the convention of falling into despair on discovering Edward's betrayal. Instead, through Catherine's determination

[421] Margaret Oliphant, *A Country Gentleman and His Family*, 1886, repr. (Teddington: Echo Library, 2010), p. 82.
[422] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 242.

to rescue the domestic and public spaces she has worked so hard to build., Oliphant demonstrates the importance of female resilience and tenacity.

It is no coincidence then that once Edward's betrayal is revealed, Catherine's most important investment is made in Hester, her cousin John's daughter. Though the two share a fraught relationship throughout the novel, they eventually come to amicable terms when Edward absconds, abandoning them both. In the final chapter of the novel, Oliphant's radicalism can be heard loudly during a conversation between Catherine and Hester in which the two discuss Hester's future. Catherine tells Hester that 'It is a great pity […] a girl like you, that instead of teaching or doing needlework, you should not go to Vernon's, as you have a right to do, and work there.' (p. 454). Not only does Catherine suggest that Hester take up a career, her words echo Oliphant's own in her essay 'The Condition of Women' when she discusses how women, particularly unmarried women, are placed into roles such as 'half-starved needlewomen, […] [and] poor governesses' because other more lucrative professional positions 'remain in the possession of men'.[423] I would argue that what these two quotations demonstrate, though they were published twenty-five years apart, is Oliphant's prevailing belief that women, whether married or unmarried, should have the opportunity to enter in public roles and careers, and indeed select whatever career they wish, much like their male counterparts. Oliphant reiterates the importance of learning and progression when Catherine tells Hester that after 'a few years' work […] you would be an excellent man of business' (p. 454). Though it may appear unusual that Catherine suggests Hester could be 'an excellent man' rather than woman, of business, I would argue that the choice of this term is entirely deliberate. It reiterates Oliphant's belief that a woman could equal a man in business, much like Mulock Craik

[423] Oliphant, 'The Condition of Women', p. 160.

suggests, and reinforces Catherine's enterprising business savvy as the saviour of the bank when her male cousin absconds. Radically, through Catherine and Hester, Oliphant has provided examples of two women who have made a 'departure from conventional femininity'.[424]

Like Catherine who has lived her life in the public space as an unmarried woman, Hester declares that she 'will never marry!' (p. 454). The final sentence of the novel which questions, 'What can a young woman desire more than to have such possibility of choice?' (p. 456) exemplifies Oliphant's belief that choice in whether to marry and have a family, and choice in a career, should be a woman's prerogative. Like Oliphant, Catherine and Hester are not 'men of business'; instead they are women of business. Through observing and helping Catherine in both the domestic and the public spheres, Hester is rewarded with the knowledge of what it means to have the opportunity afforded by 'choice'. Indeed, towards the novel's closure, when the details of Edward's betrayal are brought to light, Catherine and Hester unite both in grief and in determination:

> What new thing was this? Hester had lost all her spirit and power. She [Catherine] had got within the sphere of [one] stronger than she.
>
> […] 'Hester,' she said gravely, 'I understand that you are very unhappy. So am I. I thank you for being sorry for me. […] But just now, understand, there is a great deal to do. We must stand between – him,' her voice faltered for a moment, then went on clear as before, 'between him and punishment. If he can be saved he must be saved; if not we must save what we can. Free me now, for I have a great deal to do.'
>
> […] 'What can you do? Are you able to do it?', she said.
>
> 'Able!' said Catherine, raising herself upright with a sort of smile. 'I am able for everything that has to be done.'
>
> […] 'I will do – whatever you tell me,' she said. (pp. 412-413)

Catherine's sadness on the realisation that Edward did not care for her and planned to abscond is subjugated by her need to go on and do what must be done to save the bank.

[424] Heilmann, 'Mrs Grundy's Rebellion', p. 226

In this scene, both women find common ground in their need to put aside the turmoil of the domestic space and do their duty to save the bank. It is because of this shared need that Catherine becomes a kind of teacher and guide for the younger and less experienced Hester. The younger woman takes on the mantle of helping Catherine to preserve her public identity by helping her save the bank, while also beginning the formation of her own role within the public space.

Here, Catherine's and Hester's relationship mirrors that of Lady Markland's and Mrs Warrender's from *A Country Gentleman and his Family*. In his discussion of the relationship between the two women, Levine suggests how, despite their conflict, they are united in their sadness over Theo Warrender's 'egoism and dominance.'[425] He notes how 'for moments, but only for moments, the two essentially opposed women whose lives have taken sadly parallel tracks come together in sympathy and in resistance to [Theo's] repressive moral and conventional demands'.[426] What Levine touches on so acutely is Oliphant's ability within her novels to register the complexity of relationships (often female) which, though initially fuelled by dislike, find common ground in the need to make calm the turmoil which threatens to destroy the domestic space. Though Catherine and Hester begin their relationship as enemies, their similarities as enterprising women who value the importance of their identities within the public space means they must work together to prevent Edward's 'egoism and dominance' from destroying what Catherine has built in the bank, which Hester will eventually inherit.[427] This handing over of power begins with Catherine's recognition that 'she had got within the sphere of [one] stronger than [Hester]' (p. 412). While Catherine acknowledges her own role in the public 'sphere' and therefore the

[425] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 246.
[426] Ibid.
[427] Ibid.

responsibility it brings, she also recognises Hester's lack of experience regarding the public space she is taking her first steps into. This is what makes Catherine's next fortifying words to the young woman so crucial. By giving Catherine room to put aside her emotion, 'Oliphant's inclination to resist sentimentality', as Levine argues, comes to the fore.[428] Recognising her own and Hester's sadness, Catherine tells the young girl 'I understand that you are very unhappy. So am I […] But just now, understand, there is a great deal to do' (p. 413). The pauses between the sentences speak loudly of Oliphant's reticence to launch into disabling sadness. Catherine's resolve is located between her acceptance of the tumult of emotion that Edward's betrayal has caused both her and Hester, and the understanding that they must now both continue together. Indeed, it is these pauses that encourage engagement once again in 'in-between thinking'.[429]

Oliphant allows space for her readers to pause and reflect, just as Catherine herself does, on her role within both the domestic and the public spaces. At this precise moment, the bond between Catherine's identities as both enterprising businesswoman and as Aunt Catherine is at its strongest, and as a result she signifies the joining together of both spaces. Her pauses allow the reader to 'think' Catherine's thoughts and feel her tumult of emotion as she experiences them. Though Edward has caused great upset in Catherine's domestic and public lives, she does not allow both spaces to flounder. Instead, she understands the importance of passing her knowledge and experience on to Hester. She discusses the work to be done in terms of 'We' (p. 413), including the younger woman in her future plan for saving the bank. Though there is something of Oliphantian 'disenchantment' in Catherine's initial reaction to Edward's

[428] Levine, 'Reading Margaret Oliphant', p. 242.
[429] Billington, *Is Literature Healthy*?, p. 104.

betrayal, a disenchantment based on her failure to foresee Edward's ill intent, this is replaced and overpowered by her almost automatic decision to save the public identity she has worked so hard to build, and to ensure it continues with Hester.[430] Edward has failed in the domestic space because of his treatment of Catherine and Hester, and in the public space because of his mismanagement and near-ruin of the bank. It is in the hands of both women to 'stand between him and punishment. If he can be saved he must be saved; if not, we must save what we can' (p. 413). Catherine's motherly feelings for Edward are made apparent when 'her voice faltered for a moment' (p. 413) on mentioning 'him' for the first time, but her firm resolve about what must be done for the business quickly overrides her sadness. Indeed, Catherine's determination and her wish to lead Hester into the type of public existence she has enjoyed, demonstrates again the occasionally difficult situations which must be overcome by women who embody roles in both the public and the private spaces. Though she is in pain because of Edward's betrayal, Catherine is 'able for everything that has to be done' (p. 413) to maintain her public identity and rescue the business which represents it. Not only does the bank's reputation and ongoing success matter from a personal point of view, it demonstrates also Catherine's hard work and lifetime experience as an enterprising woman with undoubtable business acumen. While Hester's lack of experience leads her to lose 'all her spirit and power' (p. 412) in the face of trauma, Catherine remains strong while the bank, and indeed her public reputation, are at stake. Indeed, Catherine's confidence and surety are enough to fortify Hester who declares that she 'will do – whatever you tell me' (p. 413). Edward's betrayal means Catherine is rescuing her family business for the second time and she appeals to Hester to 'show what mettle is in you now' (p. 414) ahead of her assistance in its rescue. Catherine's

[430] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 244.

faith in Hester represents not only the younger woman's entry into a public identity of her own, but also Catherine's passing over of knowledge and experience to her. This experience is crucial as Hester goes on to forge her own public and enterprising identity and takes the business forward into the future.

A Hidden Enterprise

Six years after the appearance of *Hester*, in 1889, Oliphant published another of her short stories, 'Mademoiselle'. The story's central female character, Claire De Castel-Sombre, is a thirty-five-year-old governess working in the home of a middle-class English family, the Wargraves. Despite her imposing surname, Claire's family is not wealthy because her father had 'fallen off from [his high-born family's] spirit after becoming an artist.'[431] When he dies, leaving his family with little money, the responsibility falls to Claire to send a portion of her wages back to her English mother who still lives in France. Though she is still a relatively young woman, Claire has become used to her role as a governess which she has carried out for fifteen years, and 'expected nothing but to go on as she was doing for the rest of her life' (p. 118). Despite her resignation to her lot in life, Claire's acceptance of it is disturbed when Mr Wargrave's cousin, Charles, proposes marriage to her. Resembling the main drive of Oliphant's novel, *A Country Gentleman and his Family*, which, as Levine observes focusses on 'a common routine, dreary, and stultifying and unequal to the desires and abilities of [its] protagonists', *Mademoiselle* begins in a similar fashion, before subverting the idea of a dull routine by ending with an enterprising young woman in

[431] Margaret Oliphant, 'Mademoiselle' in *A Widow's Tale and Other Stories* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1889) pp. 115-176, p. 117. All further references will be made within the body of the text.

a fulfilling version of extended domesticity.[432] While fifteen-years spent working within a domestic space which belongs to other people has induced Claire to a dim acceptance of her life's role, Oliphant uses Claire's enterprising nature to show how she transforms her time spent within the daily domestic routine to forge her identity and realise that she is still a young and vital woman. As in *Country Gentleman*, the form of *Mademoiselle* acts as a 'motor to the exploration of women's lives', but it does so in a way which shows the crucial importance of what is valuable about domesticity and the role it plays in women's experience, and how, when used to its fullest, it helps a woman to reach her potential.[433] Through a gradual rediscovery of her identity, Claire leaves the Wargraves' home and returns to the extended domesticity of her home in Paris where she is 'emancipated' (p. 174).

Though, unlike Catherine and Kirsteen, Claire is not actually a woman of business, through her, Oliphant provides her readers with an example of a female character who is enterprising in a different way. As a woman in 'the full flower and prime of life' (p. 115), Claire's role as an onlooker within the domestic space of a family which is not her own affords her time to develop from a 'raw girl […] injured by life and all that happened to her – into a calm, rational woman [who had] acquired a dignity of her own which no little slights or scorn could touch' (pp. 115-116). With fifteen years of experience in her role, and with a sense of otherness due to her dual-nationality parentage, Claire has a way of 'becoming intensely English at a moment's notice, and intensely French the next' (p. 115). Her French background imbues her with the ability to maintain a sense of personal identity which does not originate with the family whose children she takes care of and which extends beyond the formal title

[432] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 239.
[433] Ibid.

of ‘Mademoiselle’ she uses in her role. Indeed, Claire’s role as care-giver and helper, represents another example of the unconventional family unit, in which Claire is not only the governess, but is also a helper and organiser within the family. Her role gives her a place within the family, and yet its status as a working role means she is also apart from it and can maintain her own identity.

Though Claire’s position as a governess is a conventional one within nineteenth-century attitudes towards acceptable careers for women, Oliphant actually demonstrates her ‘natural vivacity’ (p. 116), and potential for individuality and expression, which had previously been subdued by the gradual acceptance of her position and its prospects. Though Claire appears to have accepted her life as it is, her subdued resignation enables Oliphant to reveal the ‘desperate need of women […] for a life beyond the routine – a life […] less rigorously dutiful, that allows for growth and change.’[434] Indeed, as Levine continues, Oliphant ‘rarely treats the merely dutiful, the dutiful without struggle, as admirable’.[435] I would agree with this, arguing that it is Claire’s undercurrent of disquietude in her role which Oliphant uses to reveal her nature as an enterprising woman. Despite her apparent acceptance of her position and her lot in life, her dignified sense of experience coupled with her role as an accomplished organiser of the domestic space suggest Claire has not yet given up on a different future. Indeed, her capabilities as a young and able woman are reinforced and reinvigorated when she is called upon to help Mrs Wargrave during a fainting fit:

> She took the command of the situation quite simply, taking the water from Charles Wargrave’s hands without even looking at him, and sending the aggrieved husband out of the way. The men ran about quite humbly, obeying the orders of Mademoiselle, who knew what to do. […] She did not look like Mademoiselle, a mere official without any name of her own. In her loose, white dressing-gown, her hair falling out of its very insecure fastenings, her mind entirely occupied with her patient, she looked like one of those beings whom

[434] Ibid. p. 233.
[435] Ibid.

> men called angels […] This was the position which Mademoiselle had suddenly taken […] Mademoiselle in a moment took everything out of their hands.' (pp. 123-124)

Like Catherine in *Hester* who single-handedly saves her family bank when the men around her fail in their duty, so Claire takes control to assist Mrs Wargrave when 'the men' (p. 123) have no idea how to resolve the situation. In the instance of her arrival in the drawing-room in which she immediately takes over, the men unquestioningly carry out Claire's instruction. Not only does her ability demonstrate her mastery of the domestic space, the sudden emergence of her aptitude as an individual woman (which does not go unnoticed by the male onlookers), rather than as the governess 'Mademoiselle, a mere official without any name of her own' (p. 124) signals her ability to extend the domestic space so that it encompasses both her working and her personal identities. Like Gaskell and Oliphant, who themselves demonstrated the possibilities for women to have both domestic and professional lives simultaneously, so Claire emerges not only as an 'official' (p. 123) but also as an individual woman with a personal sense of self. Because her working and her personal lives merge within the domestic space of the Wargraves' home, Claire is 'conventional and unconventional at the same time'.[436] In other words, though she has a very conventional working role as a governess, she also has a personal identity, which she forges and maintains privately.

Indeed, through Claire's dual-roles, Oliphant reiterates to her young female readers the possibilities available within the domestic space for forging and developing an identity. The version of herself, which is represented as 'Claire' rather than as 'Mademoiselle', is glimpsed through her physical appearance as she rushes

[436] Ibid.

into the room wearing a ‘loose, white dressing-gown, her hair falling out of its very insecure fastenings’ (p. 124). This version is made real again when she returns to her room after the event and catches sight of herself in the mirror:

> Her hair had not got completely detached, but hung loosely, forming a sort of frame round her face, which, naturally pale, had now a slight rose-flush; and her eyes, generally so quiet, were shining with the commotion produced in her physical being by the accelerated throbbing of her heart and pulses […] She half laughed to herself with amusement and surprise, and no doubt a little pleasure too. She looked (she thought) as she had done when she was a girl of twenty’ (p. 125)

Claire’s youthfulness and vitality are shown through her ‘rose-flush’ and the ‘accelerated throbbing of her heart and pulses’ (p. 125). In this and in the previous passage, Oliphant demonstrates Claire’s private self which she has had room to develop within the domestic space, and which exists despite her restrictive governess role. Indeed, it is the realisation of her still attractive features and the ‘commotion’ (p. 125) this realisation causes within her that initiates the shift away from the acceptance of her domestic working identity, into her personal identity as ‘Claire’. This shift reminds her not only of her youth, but also of her identity as a sexual and attractive being. Indeed, it is Charles Wargrave’s unexpected proposal, which acts as the defining moment of the story, leading Claire to view herself more completely than before as Claire de Castel-Sombre, an attractive and enterprising woman, rather than as ‘Mademoiselle’ the governess. As she returns to her room after the proposal, she ‘forgot altogether that she was Mademoiselle, and became herself, a woman of strong feelings, great personal pride, and a temperament impassioned and imperious rather than subdued and calm’ (p. 142). Indeed, though Claire is sent away from her position as governess when Mrs Wargrave discovers Charles’s proposal, her return to her family home in Paris offers not only a move into a more liberating version of extended domesticity, in which she enjoys ‘the freedom of a woman at home – not the […]

sobriety of an official' (p. 174) but also an incursion into the public sphere of the city as she looks for new employment.

Claire displaces her identity as 'Mademoiselle' the governess as she moves around the city, 'emancipated [with] […] the warm thrill of independence' (p. 174). When Charles travels to Paris in a bid to repeat his offer of marriage away from the Wargraves' interference, he proves himself as a suitable suitor for Claire. Like Phoebe and Lucilla, Claire's self-determination means any potential partner must 'satisfy [her] hopes and fulfil [her] potentialities.[437] Charles demonstrates his genuine love for her by repeating his proposal within the environment of her own extended domestic space, where he views Claire as 'he had never seen her before, free to express any emotion, free to come and go as she pleased, carrying her heart in her face' (p. 175). In a direct contrast to the tension within the marriage of Theo and Lady Markland in *A Country Gentleman and his Family* in which Theo views his wife's identity as 'an obstacle to be obliterated', Charles is delighted to see Claire enjoying a position as an independent and enterprising woman.[438] His proposal is finally successful because it takes place away from the Wargraves' home, in Claire's own version of fulfilling extended domesticity. Even more importantly, it is offered on the basis that Claire will have the 'self of her own' which Theo wishes to deny Lady Markland.[439]

The conclusion of the story enables Oliphant to again demonstrate the importance of extended domesticity in helping women to find and cultivate their own identities. She shows, radically, that women with conventional roles could still maintain a sense of independence and choice and that, most importantly, extended domesticity is crucial in helping women to find and reach their potential.

[437] Ibid., p. 241.
[438] Ibid., p. 249.
[439] Ibid.

An Early New Woman

Another female character who forges a public identity appears in Oliphant's novel *Kirsteen*, published in 1890. The closing decade of the nineteenth-century was 'a time when New Woman fiction was becoming established and when important texts had appeared by Mona Caird and Sarah Grand.'[440] Certainly, as I will demonstrate in this section, Kirsteen Douglas was one of Oliphant's most important attempts at creating a female character who exemplified women's movement into the public space towards the close of the century. As the daughter of a laird, Kirsteen is expected to marry advantageously. Defying her father, who is, as Levine notes in an observation of several of Oliphant's paternal figures, 'irresponsible and crushingly insensitive to [his] wi[fe's] and daughters' needs, desires, and powers', she becomes secretly engaged to her neighbour's son, Ronald, before he leaves for battle in India.[441] On discovering that her father has planned for her to marry a much older man, Kirsteen leaves home and travels to London to begin work as a dressmaker in Miss Jean's millinery business (Miss Jean is the sister of Marg'ret, the Douglas's kindly housekeeper). Time passes, and Kirsteen discovers that Ronald has been killed in battle. Choosing to remain unmarried, Kirsteen dedicates her life to her career, eventually taking over Miss Jean's business and leading it to great success. Kirsteen Douglas is another of Oliphant's representations of the enterprising woman. Unlike Lucilla and Phoebe whose enterprise took place within an expanded version of their domestic space, and Catherine, whose enterprise within the public sphere resulted in her taking care of her

[440] Heilmann, 'Mrs Grundy's Rebellion', p. 226.
[441] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 247.

extended family in the domestic space, in Kirsteen, Oliphant goes a step further. She is a young, enterprising woman who moves out of the domestic space and to another city hundreds of miles away to forge a new identity as a career woman within the public space.

Kirsteen is a skilled needlewoman, whose talent is made clear early in the novel when she embroiders a handkerchief for her secretly betrothed, Ronald, using 'a long thread of her red hair' which she fashions into his initials.[442] Though her skilful sewing is representative of the talent which is to make Kirsteen's future career, the emotional intent behind it demonstrates also her latent sexuality. As Mullin suggests about *The Cuckoo in the Nest*'s Patty Hewitt, Kirsteen also enables Oliphant (as Gaskell does throughout her novels), to consider a young woman who acknowledges her sexuality, therefore complicating 'Oliphant's apparently conservative sexual politics.'[443] Although, as Beth Harris points out, 'Oliphant does not openly address sexuality, the troubling implications of Kirsteen's situation seethe just beneath the surface of the text.'[444] I would argue that the 'troubling implications' Harris discusses, refer not to 'troubling' sexuality, but rather to 'the household domination exercised by Drumcarro [Mr Douglas, Kirsteen's father, is the laird of the Drumcarro estate, so is often referred to by the title] [which] stifle[s] women's individuality, independence, and ultimately integrity.'[445] Indeed, I would suggest that what Oliphant represents through Kirsteen's hidden expression of her sexuality is not a fearfulness for what female sexuality represents, but rather a questioning of domestic spaces (such as Drumcarro's estate) which do not allow young women to grow and find fulfilment

[442] Margaret Oliphant, *Kirsteen* (Glasgow: The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2010), p. 25.
[443] Mullin, *Working Girls*, p. 211.
[444] Beth Harris, *Famine and Fashion* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 45.
[445] Ibid.

either personally or professionally. Indeed, this is evidenced through Kirsteen's private thoughts and feelings for Ronald:

> […] Kirsteen though with a slightly divided attention, and one ear anxiously intent on what was going on indoors, pursued her thoughts. It gave them a more vivid sweetness that they were entirely her own, a secret which she might carry safely without anyone suspecting its existence under cover of everything that was habitual and visible […] When she was dull – and life was often dull at Drumcarro […] she would retire into herself and hear the whisper in her heart, 'Will ye wait till I come back?' – […] just like a spell; the clouds would disperse and the sun break out, and her heart would float forth upon that golden stream.' (p. 40)

Kirsteen steps outside of the family home during a family gathering to 'pursue her thoughts' privately about Ronald's earlier admission of love. Not only are these thoughts 'entirely her own' to enjoy, she literally removes herself from the interior of the oppressive domestic space of Drumcarro's house to the freedom of the outdoors in order to immerse herself in them.

Kirsteen's sexuality is hidden from her family along with her freshly awakened feelings for Ronald because, I would argue, it represents the beginning of her eventual move towards independence and an identity within the public space, an identity which she begins on her own, removed from her family. This is demonstrated when she imagines how her thoughts are separate from 'everything that was habitual and visible' (p. 40) in her daily life. Not only does Kirsteen go outside of the home to enjoy her private thoughts, she imagines herself removed from the routine domesticity and monotonous habits of Drumcarro while she thinks them. Indeed, both the thoughts, and Kirsteen's awakened and hidden sexuality, become a kind of starting point for her future life away from her family home and her father's confined version of domesticity. Along with a new understanding of her sexuality, Ronald's admission of his love for Kirsteen brings with it a new beginning for her away from the 'dull' life at Drumcarro. Her promise to him that she will wait as long as it takes for him to return

from India is filled not only with romantic feeling but also with the excitement of a new beginning for Kirsteen. While the promise 'was only a minute of time […] there would be food enough in it for the thoughts of all future years' (p. 39). Though Kirsteen cares for Ronald, her feelings for him have formed the realisation that 'the future years' offer an independent life away from Drumcarro's version of domesticity. Kirsteen's sexuality is hidden from her family because it is 'entirely her own' (p. 40) and thus represents her move into independent adulthood and away from the unsatisfying domestic life offered by her father. Oliphant's radicalism comes to the fore here, not only in the way she approaches Kirsteen's awakened sexuality as something exciting, hopeful and as a source of enjoyment, but also because Kirsteen's passion for Ronald is secondary to her awakened sense of freedom and opportunity. It is this sense of a new life which means Kirsteen cannot possibly marry the kindly but much older Glendochart when her father attempts to arrange it. Her lack of fulfillment in the domestic space is recognised by Marg'ret who 'read all this new world of meaning in the girl's eyes more surely than words could have told her' (p. 135). Marg'ret recognises the change in Kirsteen from the young girl she was before Ronald's admission, to the young woman she becomes once she makes the decision to leave the confines of her family home.

As Ann Heilmann suggests, by endowing Kirsteen with the strength of mind to escape the arrangement by literally running away from home, Oliphant moves into the feminist territory of 'female self-determination'.[446] Indeed, Oliphant's radicalism is made apparent when she demonstrates Kirsteen's choice to not only leave her home, but to go to London to stay with Marg'ret's sister, Miss Jean. Like Catherine, who recovered herself from the terrible blow dealt by Edward when she realised she must

[446] Heilmann, 'Mrs Grundy's Rebellion', p. 228.

act to save the bank for a second time, Kirsteen demonstrates the same kind of independent resolve. She 'saw the sudden flash of the resolution, the clearing away of all clouds, the rise of the natural courage […]' (p. 135). The confined domestic space of Drumcarro's home does not offer her 'room of her own' to grow in the same way it does for Lucilla and Phoebe in their families' homes. Instead, Kirsteen's 'resolution' leads her to realise that the crucial freedom and 'room' she needs to prosper in exists beyond her family home and out in the city. Kirsteen's resolution enables Oliphant to demonstrate how a life trapped in the confines of a difficult and unyielding family home is as unfulfilling as being imprisoned in an unrewarding and unequal marriage. Comparisons can be made between Kirsteen and Lady Markland who, when her first husband dies, felt 'she was free from a bondage which had become intolerable to her, which day by day she had felt herself less able to bear.'[447] Much like Kirsteen who thrives when she enters the public space and begins a career of her own, Lady Markland 'begins to become her own woman' when she takes on her late husband's business.[448] Like Kirsteen, she

> entered with all the zest of an active-minded and intelligent woman into the work from which she had been debarred all her previous life. No man, perhaps, - seeing that men can always find serious occupation when they choose to do so, - can throw himself with the same delight into unexpected work as such a woman can do, a woman to who it is salvation from many lesser miseries, as well as an advantage in itself.'[449]

While Kirsteen's entrapment was caused by her difficult father who did not wish for his daughters to prosper beyond his restricted version of domesticity, Lady Markland was constrained by her marriage which prevented her from having a career of her own and forging her own public existence. Through Lady Markland's new-

[447] Margaret Oliphant, *A Country Gentleman and his Family*, 1886, repr, (Teddington: Echo Library, 2010), p. 102.
[448] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 243.
[449] Oliphant, *A Country Gentleman and his Family*, p. 104.

found ‘career’, Oliphant reinforces again the importance of extended domesticity. Much in the way that Oliphant and Gaskell used rooms within their own homes to write, so Lady Markland sets up a ‘large writing table, occupying the centre of the [morning] room, with all sorts of drawers full of papers’ on which she conducts her day-to-day management of the estate.[450] Like Gaskell and Oliphant, Lady Markland uses the domestic space of her home to work and even to begin to forge her own professional identity. Though she is a wealthy woman, she finds ‘delight’ in her ‘serious occupation’, quickly proving that she is more capable then her late husband at managing the estate’s finances and even saving it from ruin by paying off his debts and ‘plac[ing] her son in the position his father had lost.’[451] Indeed, through Lady Markland’s new-found happiness in her working identity and ability, Oliphant demonstrates the possibilities for women to find fulfilment and development in a successful occupation. She shows that women should be given the opportunity to fulfil their potential, potential often repressed through stifled versions of domesticity such as Drumcarro’s home and Lady Markland’s marriage.

Through both examples, Oliphant demonstrates the essential need for women to remove themselves from situations which prevent them from reaching their full potential in both the domestic and the public spaces. Indeed, Oliphant’s radicalism is writ large here once again as she demonstrates to her young female readers the importance of female self-expression and fulfilment. As Mulock Craik suggests, young women should have the ‘freedom to stand on their own feet, and, be they single or married, to take their affairs into their own hands.’[452] Indeed, Oliphant’s female characters represent the kind of self-determination Mulock Craik discusses,

[450] Oliphant, *A Country Gentleman and his Family*, p. 105.
[451] Ibid., p. 104.
[452] Mulock Craik, ‘About Money’, p. 371.

demonstrating especially the importance of extended domesticity in the recognition of women's potential. Like Catherine, Kirsteen is an unmarried woman who uses her enterprising talents to succeed in the public space and to forge a career for herself. In 'The Condition of Women', Oliphant discusses the 'large proportion of [unmarried] Englishwomen [who] seek their own maintenance and earn their own bread' and who, as a result, 'fall back upon that poor little needle, the primitive and original handicraft of femininity.'[453] While Gaskell's famous needlewoman, Ruth Hilton, was exploited and seduced, Kirsteen demonstrates a new generation of young working women who show many signs of the New Woman of the period. She connects her sewing skills with her independent and enterprising qualities to 'learn to be a mantua-maker to support myself' (p. 193). For Kirsteen dressmaking is a 'trade' (p. 192), not simply a means to an end. Indeed, dressmaking is a trade in the same way a man may enjoy his own professional work; Oliphant suggests that too often fulfilling careers 'remain in the possession of men'.[454] As Harris points out, Kirsteen's 'iteration of her wish to work mark[s] […] a willingness to acknowledge […] the step she is taking - she is a woman who has chosen to work for her living, who has chosen to learn a trade'.[455] Kirsteen's determination to work is exemplified through her straightforward assertion that her move to London is 'not to see the world, but to make my fortune' (p. 188). Oliphant suggests, radically, that women can use their skills in trade to make their own money and support themselves financially (much as she and Gaskell did through the sales of their novels). Kirsteen can turn her dressmaking skill into a commodity by selling the dresses she makes. Crucially, Kirsteen's suggestion that she will learn from

[453] Oliphant, 'The Condition of Women', pp. 142-143.
[454] Ibid.
[455] Harris, *Famine and Fashion*, pp. 47-48.

Miss Jean's skill as she carves out her new identity in the public space reinforces the importance Oliphant places on education and women's abilities to educate each other.

Like Oliphant and Gaskell, whose novels convey life situations which their young female readers can learn from, so Miss Jean's experience teaches Kirsteen how to hone her skills in dressmaking and make her mark as a talented and skilled woman in the public space. Indeed, like Catherine Vernon, who passes her business skills and knowledge on to Hester, so Miss Jean hands down her dressmaking skill to Kirsteen:

> […] it is certain that she [Kirsteen] applied herself to the invention of pretty confections and modifications of the fashions with much of the genuine enjoyment which attends an artist in all crafts, and liked to handle and drape the pretty materials and adapt them to this and that pretty wearer, as a painter likes to arrange and study the more subtle harmonies of light and shade. Miss Jean, who had herself been very successful in her day, but was no longer quite so quick to catch the value of a tint […] was wise enough to perceive the gifts of her young assistant, and soon began to require her presence in the showroom, to consult with her over special toilettes and how to secure special effects (p. 197).

Like Catherine and Hester, Miss Jean and Kirsteen share a relationship which involves the younger woman learning valuable skills which help her to forge her own position within the public space. Like Catherine, Miss Jean runs and manages her own business and is an older woman with an independent and respected public role. By including such reciprocal relationships between older and younger women in her novels, Oliphant makes clear the importance of enterprising and experienced women passing on their knowledge to the younger generation. She reiterates the possibilities available for enterprising women to use their talents in business and to forge a career in the public space. While Miss Jean had 'been very successful in her day' (p. 197), she was now 'wise enough to perceive the gifts of her young assistant' (p. 197). She realises the importance of Kirsteen's modern and forward-thinking approach which will help to take the business into the future and she enjoys how the young girl uses her dressmaking skills to create new 'special effects' (p. 197) and fashions of which she

is unaware. Oliphant's radicalism is heard loudly in this quotation, because she actively considers Kirsteen's (and indeed all young women's) career opportunities and options. As both Oliphant's and Gaskell's novels set out to educate their young female readers, she demonstrates here the possibilities which exist when older, knowledgable women pass on their skills and education to future generations of women who take these skills forward to continue and further their trade.

Kirsteen's public identity is denoted by her new moniker of 'Miss Kirsteen'. The removal of her surname is significant because, as Christine Bayles Kortsch points out, it signifies a removal from her father and the 'unimaginative, unpaid sewing [he] demanded'.[456] More than this, the removal of the Douglas name extricates Kirsteen from her father's values and even her role trapped within his uninspiring and confining version of domesticity. As 'Miss Kirsteen', Kirsteen is given a new identity, one which signifies her newly-forged role within the public space and the one which she uses to embark upon her dressmaking career. Crucially, 'Miss' reinforces Kirsteen's position as an unmarried woman, a status that never changes throughout the novel. As Heilmann points out, 'although her unmarried state is not a deliberate choice, but the result of tragic circumstances, Oliphant implies that it is only as a single woman that Kirsteen has been able to achieve what she wants from life'.[457] Indeed, the swift ending of Kirsteen and Ronald's promised union means that she is free to expand her skills within the public space and not within the domestic space as a married woman. Her title as 'Miss Kirsteen' is important when Kirsteen returns to her family home to take care of her dying mother. Her new and successful public identity means she is not required to embody the daughterly, domestic role which was imposed on her in the

[456] Christine Bayles Kortsch, *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction: Literacy, Textiles, and Activism* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing: 2009), p. 114.
[457] Heilmann, 'Mrs Grundy's Rebellion', p. 229.

past, making her free to bring her public identity into her father's home. Like Catherine, (and indeed, like Gaskell and Oliphant) who is financially solvent and in a position to help her family, Kirsteen's financial gains means she can assist her father by offering to buy back some of the Douglas family land he had lost:

> 'Father,' said Kirsteen, 'I am going away today.'
> He gave her another lowering and stormy glance. 'It is the best thing you can do,' he said. 'You were never wanted here.'
> […] 'But I did not come to speak of myself. I know,' she said, 'father, that you like where you can to add on a little of the old Douglas lands to what you have already.'
> He gave her a more direct look, astonished, not knowing what she meant; then, 'What o' that?' he said.
> 'No more than this – that money's sometimes wanting and I thought if the opportunity arose – I have done very well – I have some siller– at your command.'
> Drumcarro was very much startled […] Then he said, 'Your mantua-making must have thriven. I would like to know one thing about ye, have you put my name intill your miserable trade?'
> 'No,' she said; 'so far as any name is in it, it is Miss Kirsteen.' (p. 336).

Kirsteen's return to her father's home is as an enterprising and independent woman who does not require his family name to succeed.

In his exploration of *A Country Gentleman and his Family*, Levine discusses the near impossible relationship between two of the novel's central characters, Theo Warrender and his wife, Lady Markland. Trapped in a marriage that offers her no respite from her jealous and immature husband's demands, Lady Markland is stifled and oppressed. Levine's comments on Theo's jealousy, I feel, resonate loudly with the relationship between Kirsteen and her father, when he suggests that it is 'everything about [her] that implies she has a self of her own, that marks her as different, […] that suggests she has more experience […] and is entitled to an independent judgment [which] becomes disenchanting and an obstacle to be obliterated.'[458] Like Theo Warrender, Drumcarro is angered by Kirsteen's new identity which is completely

[458] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 249.

removed from her past life as his daughter. Veiled as deep shame that his name should be embroiled in her 'miserable trade' (p. 336), Drumcarro's true feelings are closer to envy and jealousy that his daughter has experience of working in London and a clear sense of judgment which reaches far beyond his own. By removing herself from her father's stifling version of domesticity, Kirsteen has not only forged a new and successful identity in the public space, she has also become financially stable in her own right. This means that the buying back of the 'old Douglas lands' (p. 336) comes in the form of a business transaction. Her success as an enterprising woman in the public space allows her to use 'Miss Kirsteen', her new (and indeed, public) identity, as a title for the land. Kirsteen's return to the domestic space of her father's home ironically signifies her disassociation from it. By using her public identity as a businesswoman to make the purchase of the family land, Kirsteen proves her business acumen and reinforces her success in the private space, which has nothing to do with her father's confined domesticity. Like Margaret Hale, who comes to the financial assistance of Thornton, 'endow[ing] him with her legacy so that he can pay off his debts and keep his mill', Kirsteen's actions represent what Showalter terms as 'the feminine heroine's apotheosis', she goes on to add that this is 'the ultimate in the power of self-sacrifice.'[459] Though Showalter terms Margaret's actions as 'self-sacrifice', I would argue that 'sacrifice' is not quite the right term for either female character. Instead, Kirsteen's choice to offer financial assistance to her father reinforces her role as an independent and enterprising woman with an identity of her own in the public space. Not only has Kirsteen made a success of her business in the public space, her financial security allows her to assist her father.

[459] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 69.

Rather than sacrificing anything of herself, the offer she makes highlights Kirsteen's success and reinforces how far she has moved away from her father's rigid version of the domestic. While he requires her financial help, she no longer requires his. Indeed, Kirsteen's and Margaret's situations are undoubtedly similar, but while Margaret's inheritance signals her move onto the periphery of a new, more public existence, Kirsteen's identity as an enterprising businesswoman goes a step further. Though Margaret's inheritance brings with it financial independence, Oliphant, writing later in the century, endows Kirsteen with the ability to make her own money and manage her own business. Kirsteen's role as a businesswoman is a later extension of Margaret's new role as a financially independent woman beginning to understand financial matters, such as interest, incomings, and outgoings. Not only is Kirsteen financially successful, it is her talent for dressmaking which earns her money. She is independent and self-sufficient and has earned her identity out in the public space.

Through her successful business acumen in the public space, Kirsteen has both reclaimed and added to the domestic space which had earlier confined her. Indeed, Kirsteen is one of Oliphant's most radical female characters, who 'share[s] many characteristics and aspirations with those of the younger, explicitly feminist New Woman writers.'[460] Not only does she move out of a domestic situation which offers her no space for freedom or personal growth, she also fashions an entirely new identity within the public sphere, using her skills to expand her trade and run her business. Oliphant 'establishes her heroine as an artist' taking the needlewoman full circle from the dangerous and dark days of the sweat-shop to a talent which would evoke femininity […] represented as a source of strength'.[461] Kirsteen is Oliphant's most

[460] Heilmann, 'Mrs Grundy's Rebellion', p. 232.
[461] Ibid., p.231.; Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1984), p. 197.

radical example of the possibilities available for women to forge an identity within the public space.

Another Girl of the Period

Following on from the example of *Kirsteen*, Oliphant continued her exploration of the enterprising young woman in her short story of 1892, 'A Girl of the Period'. Like Kirsteen Douglas, the story's central female character, Blanche Fontaine, ventures into the territory of the New Woman. As an only child, Blanche feels cloistered at home with her parents, Judge and Lady Fontaine. Despite her loving upbringing, she wishes to pursue her interest in art by leaving home, alone, to travel to a school in Paris. Her determination to leave is reinforced when her work is criticised by an art expert who visits Blanche's home, informing her that though she has some talent, her drawing skill leaves considerable room for improvement. Though Blanche displays a powerful sense of self-determination and a lack of interest in finding a husband, she has a suitor in young barrister, Mr Dewsbury. Despite his professional status, Dewsbury is reticent about discussing with Blanche what he calls his 'very humble' family.[462] Deciding that she could only marry a man who would give her the type of freedom and trust she feels her parents deny her, freedom which involves 'let[ting] her go off alone, and live […] her own life' (p. 425), Blanche travels, alone, to find Dewsbury's home and meet his family before she makes her final decision.

I would argue that it is no coincidence that Oliphant selected the title of her short story, 'A Girl of the Period' to echo Eliza Lynn Linton's periodical essay, 'The Girl of the Period', which was published nine years previously. Linton's essay was a

[462] Margaret Oliphant, 'A Girl of the Period', *The English Illustrated Magazine* (London: Macmillan, 1892), pp. 418-432, p. 425. All further references will be made within the body of the text.

critique of what she saw as an ever-growing breed of dangerous and self-absorbed young girls who cared much less for marriage and children than they did for having fun and taking care of their appearance. Yet, while Linton expressed concern with what she saw as the rise of the girl who 'live[d] to please herself [and did] not care if she displease[d] everyone else', through her character Blanche, Oliphant reinforces the idea of the enterprising young woman, who is independent and even ambitious.[463] She explores Blanche's ambition by giving the young woman a stable family home which represents and provides all the possibilities of extended domesticity. While Kirsteen longed to escape the oppressive version of domesticity offered by her father and her family home, Blanche lives with parents who have encouraged her and fostered her interests:

> She was the only child of her parents […] They had no other object so dear to their hearts as this: that their child should be surrounded with everything that is best and most delightful in life. […] As for Lady Fontaine no washerwoman toiled more constantly than she did in the ceaseless effort to perfect and satisfy her child […] She had not herself been very carefully educated and had resolved that her child should have everything she had lacked; and when Blanche ceased to be a child, and set up independent ways of thinking and ambitions of her own, Lady Fontaine was (at first) much delighted. She was continually telling her husband how original the child was, what character she had, so unconventional, always taking a way of her own. (p. 418).

The close attention paid to encouraging their daughter in her education and her interests means Blanche's parents have also created an 'unconventional' (p. 418) young woman who has 'independent ways of thinking and ambitions of her own' (p. 418). The version of extended domesticity offered by their home means Blanche not only thinks for herself, but that her ideas and ambitions stretch beyond her domestic space. While Kirsteen left home in order to forge an identity as a career woman and an independence of her own, the inspiring and encouraging version of extended

[463] Eliza Lynn Linton, 'The Girl of the Period', p. 3.

domesticity offered by Blanche's home cultivates her identity while she is within it, encouraging her to be ambitious and aim for 'a way of her own' (p. 418) out in the world. While Lady Fontaine's love for Blanche, which saw her work harder than a 'washerwoman […] in the ceaseless effort to perfect and satisfy her child' (p. 418), adhered to Linton's idea of an 'unselfish' and ideal mother, her close attention has actually encouraged Blanche to become an independently-minded and determined young woman.[464] Through Blanche's upbringing within a home which fosters extended domesticity, Oliphant demonstrates the opportunities for young women who are given space to forge their own ideas and interests. She shows that while Blanche's mother 'had not herself been very carefully educated' (p. 418), her encouragement and drive to give her daughter 'everything she had lacked' (p. 418) means that Blanche is afforded different opportunities. Indeed, she becomes a part of a new generation of young women like Kirsteen, who embody independent identities and who begin to seek lives which originate within the cultivating environment of extended domesticity, but which can also move beyond it, out into the public space.

One of the ways Oliphant reinforces Blanche's 'unconventional' way of thinking, is through a conversation she has with her potential suitor, Mr Dewsbury. In this conversation, Oliphant's radical voice can be heard loudly and clearly, as Blanche discusses her thoughts on independence, moving away from her parents (whose influence she feels is becoming oppressive), and even marriage:

> The friend to whom she was speaking was not, as the old-fashioned reader may suppose, a girl like herself, but a man, and this man not a lover so far as Blanche was aware […]
> "I have heard,", he said, "that the only way of real love was so, to love you not for your sake, but one's own – because life was not possible without you: that's the highest compliment don't you think?" […]
> "What?" cried the young lady, "to ask a girl who perhaps has been very well taken care of all her life to step off from her pedestal and take care of him [her

[464] Eliza Lynn Linton, 'The Girl of the Period', p. 13.

> husband]! to follow him where he likes to go, perhaps to India for instance, she who has been the leader herself ever since she remembers? Is that what you call the greatest honour, the highest compliment, &c.? I don't see it in that light." (p. 419)

The conversation enables Oliphant to once again reveal her radicalism as she demonstrates her understanding of the 'recognition of [marriage's] limits', especially for a young woman like Blanche, brought up within the nurturing environment of extended domesticity.[465] Blanche's distaste for Mr Dewsbury's opinion that taking care of a husband in a marriage is 'the greatest honour, the highest compliment' a woman can be given (p. 419) enables Oliphant to demonstrate to her readers that marriage should not equal the end of a woman's independence or identity. Blanche's frustration towards the idea that asking a girl who has 'been very well taken care of all her life' to give up her role as 'the leader' of it (p. 419) so her husband may take her place, emphasises the importance of extended domesticity in providing women with the opportunity to create their own identities of which they themselves are in control. Indeed, her parents' cultivation of her interests and encouragement that she should be an enterprising young woman means that for Blanche, as for Lucilla and Phoebe, being subordinated to a man would be an almost impossible task and that any marriage she enters must be one which enables her to maintain her freedom. Indeed, Oliphant's wry narratorial statement that only an 'old-fashioned reader' (p. 149) could assume that Blanche's conversational partner must necessarily be female, mirrors Linton's critical suggestion that 'it is only the old-fashioned sort, not Girls of the Period […] who marry for love.'[466] While Linton is critical of this new breed of young women who are increasingly reticent to marry, Oliphant encourages the idea of female choice in marriage, even if that choice results in a woman deciding not to marry at all.

[465] Levine, 'Taking Oliphant Seriously', p. 234.
[466] Eliza Lynn Linton, 'The Girl of the Period', p. 7.

This is evidenced when Mr Dewsbury suggests that 'there [is] no such freedom as that of a young married woman – that she could go everywhere […] see life as much as she liked […] with her husband' (p. 420). While he views marriage as a partnership in which a wife gains freedom only through her husband, Blanche retorts that 'it is but the old slavery […] under another form' (p. 420). Blanche's feelings towards an unbalanced marriage enable Oliphant to demonstrate to her readers that if they choose to marry, it should not be into a regressive partnership which prevents the cultivation of their independent identity. As she herself demonstrated after the loss of her husband, Frank, and as she showed through female characters like Catherine and Kirsteen, an intelligent and talented woman could foster her talents, with or without a husband.

Despite Mr Dewsbury's eagerness to marry Blanche, Blanche is keen to maintain her freedom and travel to Paris to study art. By the end of the story, Oliphant leaves the final decision in Blanche's hands. Like Kirsteen, she chooses to 'distinguish herself by individual action [and] take matters into her own hands' (p. 426) by leaving her family home. Mr Dewsbury's reticence to tell Blanche about his family sees her decide to travel alone, incognito, and without his or her parents' knowledge, to the Dewsbury family home. In an act that signals the beginning of Blanche's incursion beyond the extended domesticity of her home, (which eventually culminates in her travelling to Paris to learn to draw), she heads to the railway station and boards a train to the village where Mr Dewsbury's family lives. On discovering that his parents are farmers who are delighted that he is to marry 'a lady o' title [who is] deep in love with him […] [though] it's mostly on her side' (p. 432), Blanche leaves their home, annoyed with Mr Dewsbury for his 'indifference to herself' (p. 432) and with her decision clearly made that rather than marry him, she must instead cultivate her own interest in art and drawing. She returns to her family home that same day with 'such a tempest of

outraged feeling in her heart as all her experience of heroines in books could not equal' (p. 432). Oliphant's (and Gaskell's) intentions for their readers to learn from the examples of female characters in novels, is made explicit in this story, for Blanche, too, has learned from the situations of the female characters in the books she has read, and her 'experience' (p. 432) of them has shown her the importance of forging her own identity. Her realisation of Mr Dewsbury's narrow view of her abilities culminates in her anger that she almost allowed herself to become trapped in an unfulfilling marriage and an oppressive version of domesticity. This time, through Blanche's 'outraged feeling' (p. 432), Oliphant reinforces the crucial importance for women to make the decision which will offer them the most personal growth and fulfilment, even if that decision means avoiding marriage.

This chapter has shown how Oliphant's novels and short stories demonstrated the importance of female enterprise and women's right to make considered choices in marriage and a career. Her earlier female characters, Lucilla and Phoebe, showed that, despite not having a career in the conventional sense, they used their talents for female enterprise within an extended domesticity to forge their own identities. Through them, Oliphant showed the importance of women finding themselves in suitable marriages which would enable them to maintain their own identities and even to use their influence out in the public sphere. Her later characters, particularly Catherine and Kirsteen, show how women could have careers and even businesses of their own, and how women's talents in the field of female business enterprise could see them forge an identity out in the public sphere.

Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated the importance of Gaskell's and Oliphant's radical voices, which could be heard clearly throughout their novels and short stories. Not only did both women deem their domestic, familial identities as important as their professional identities, they showed through the representation of examples of extended domesticity, how such an assimilation of roles could be possible for women. Indeed, for both Gaskell and Oliphant, the extended domestic space was of utmost importance for allowing women room to forge their own identities, become educated, and to find all-important space for rehabilitation and recuperation, regardless of individual life experiences.

As I have argued Gaskell's novels and short stories showed that female sexuality was a normal part of every woman's life. She provided examples of young female characters who experienced their sexuality in different ways, from the prostitute, like Esther, to the sexually aware woman, like Cynthia. While the young women represented in Gaskell's earlier novels began with little autonomy over their own lives, as the century progressed, they became more self-aware and able to make their own choices and decisions, becoming closer to the ideas of female enterprise which Oliphant discusses.

Indeed, for Oliphant, the representation of choice for women in marriage and a career was crucially important. Throughout her novels and short stories, she provides examples of women who use female enterprise to forge their own identities and even have their own careers. In her earlier works, young women like Lucilla and Phoebe use their abilities to extend the domestic sphere to their advantage, eventually marrying on equal terms, and using their influence to begin incursions into the public

sphere. In her later novels, female characters such as Catherine and Kirsteen, go even further, running businesses of their own and embodying public identities. In this respect, they are like the New Women that Oliphant apparently criticised in her journalism. As I have shown, Oliphant's need to earn her living and support an extended family meant that she needed to tread a fine line between expressing her own ideas and satisfying her conservative editors. Nevertheless, as I have argued, Oliphant's radicalism was evident to those who chose to read her fiction carefully.

For both Gaskell and Oliphant, using their novels and short stories to educate their young female readers was a strategy they employed to encourage women to imagine their lives beyond conventional domesticity. They set out to provide examples of women from across the social scale, with different life experiences in order to show that no one model of femininity or 'correct' behaviour existed. Without providing answers or solutions, they encouraged their readers to make up their own minds, and to make decisions about their own lives. Both Gaskell and Oliphant drew upon their identities as wives and mothers for inspiration, along with their knowledge of what a professional identity as a writer entailed, in order to demonstrate to all women that domesticity could be extended. That women did not necessarily need to engage in revolution or rebellion in order to find ways to lead stimulating, thoughtful and productive lives. By examining what was possible in the domestic sphere assigned to them, they could move beyond its borders; it is this message, so subtle yet so powerful, which has prompted this thesis to argue that both writers need to be reassessed as radical.

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